

LAGNIAPPE

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gh coyote

A story should begin at the beginning.
But in this story, the middle is the
beginning. Everything spirals outward
from the centre. Lies, pain, and loss haunt
the future as well as the past. The only
protection is to become disembodied - to
see the self as other.

Immortal.

Marie Laveau, June 12, 1881

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It was a time of gods.

The Norse gods heralded the season. Their frigid breaths created the winds bitter and intense. Their amusement created frozen tableaux of life. Their power created storms of cocooning snow. Their passion created an underlying motivation for beings to cling to one another, to delve into the heat at their core.

Darkness hovered over Toronto for longer nights, which afforded 'les enfants' more time to imitate mortal life, more hours to glide among their throbbing heartbeats, more moments to brush against the fragrant heat of their bodies.

And on All Hallows Eve all pretence of difference dissipated in the riot of garish costumes, glittery masques and hedonistic merrymakers. It was the singular time for vampires and humans to party as one in a much-anticipated night of unbridled revelry. Ah, the freedom in masquerade!

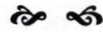
The snowstorm struck viciously three days before Hallowe'en. Air traffic was ground to a halt, the highways and roads were clogged with tediously crawling vehicles. The city was held captive and yet - the visitor arrived.

His presence was sensed throughout the vampire community even before he made himself known. A tremour of his power rippled like a hot tropic breeze before his arrival.

As if guided by an unseen hand or a whiff of premonition, Janette had prepared for the visitor's arrival. She stood framed within the door of the suite formerly belonging to her slain lover Martin Devereaux and with pleasure she noted the perfection of the new decor and furnishings. She had informed M. Andre her decorator to infuse the rooms with a classic masculine look and he hadn't failed her: the woods were dark and polished to a mirror-like sheen, the wallpapers and draperies and upholstery throughout were in deepest Mediterranean blues, creamy golds and scattered splashes of pristine white. Antiquities, mostly Greek and Roman, pulled the look together. Janette selected books from her personal library for the nightstand, fine poetry collections of eclectic styles and generations.

"Bon," she murmured her approval. Then she gingerly stepped into the chamber and drew beside a small square longlegged table next to a chaise lounge. Into a severe square-cut Baccarat crystal vase she slid a solitary calla lily, its blinding whiteness made more pronounced by the overhead hanging leaded glass lamp. She had always thought that calla lilies were among the most erotic and feminine of flowers. A kittenlike smile curled over her generous crimson lips. She nearly purred.

Janette pivoted on her heel, raven wavelets bouncing against her scarlet sheath, and she left the bedroom suite, shutting the door firmly behind her. The lock clicked shut.



The blizzard bellowed its frenzy, creating snowswirl tornadoes through the city's canyons of brick and glass.

... tonight the memories were strong, so very hot and strong. Nicholas Knight was unable to tear his eyes away from the inferno in the grate. How like the dancers the flames were, he thought, how like those berry brown mortals swathed in white gauze garments writhing around the raging fire ... here in the delta, he witnessed the voodoo rite of passage and he found it exhilarating and sensual ... they were praying for the 'guede' to arrive, the Trinity of darkness ... Baron Samedi, in top hat and tails and red beads, who chose who lived and who died ... Baron Cimetiere, the portly one who ruled the burial sites and holy mounds and who granted the 'harvest' of bones, ash, hair, nails, and all manner of growing vegetation in his cemetery domain ... and - Nicholas felt the heat of the spitting fire against his cheeks, a smile curved his mouth ever so slightly at the third god's timely arrival ... Baron LaCroix, he of the pale visage and icy eyes, he who ruled those who walked with the dead and yet had not crossed over ... zombies, his special creation.

Trepidation shattered Nick's reverie; he felt the visitor's arrival.



The softly punctuated flute melody - Japanese in origin - matched the measured kata movement of the two dark men in a reclaimed loft flat not far from Nick Knight's home. With gazelle-like grace, the Enforcers Marcellus and Antony performed their dusk ritual - barefoot, barechested, clad in similar black silken hakama pants - gliding effortlessly through the prescribed steps and breaths of a martial arts discipline they had initially learned in the early 12th century. They moved as one, paces evenly matched for they had had centuries to perfect the exercise.

In sync, as though they'd been cued, Marcellus and Antony halted mid-movement. They exchanged looks and Marcellus, the older of the pair, raised his hand in a gesture of calm. Antony moved closer to his commander. They regarded the elevator door which opened with a heavy metallic swish.

A tall man stepped from the lift and allowed a fine leather satchel to slip from his shoulder to the hardwood floor. He was a big man - broad in shoulder and chest, with a most benign countenance. His hair, worn fashionably full and curled at his collar, was flaxen. His eyes were

unmistakably cornflower blue, his lips were thin but well-versed at smiling. The gentleman wore a black Inverness leather coat over a denim jacket and jeans, a salt-and-pepper knit fisherman's turtleneck sweater and snow-covered western boots. One would judge his age to be mid-fifties, but in fact he was ancient. He carried about him an aire of casual ease and subtle strength.

Marcellus padded forward, his lieutenant close at his side. The visitor smiled with genuine affection. Awed, Marcellus and Antony genuflected reverently and inclined their heads. Automatically each pressed his right fist to his breast in customary salute. The visitor touched their heads paternally in acknowledgment. The soldiers looked up and with great sincerity, Marcellus welcomed him.

"Ave, my lord," the tribune said. "We are at your command."

"Pax vobiscum, Marcellus, Antony," the man replied, much pleased. His voice had a timbre that provoked respect and loyalty, not unlike that of a king.



Sanctuary was isolated by the storm, bound in a blinding white wrap. Snow season signaled the onset of intensified problems at the clinic, particularly among those patients with maladies of the mind. Depressions deepened with each layer of new snow, fears sharpened with every additional glaze of ice. Patients were at jeopardy moreso now than at any other time of year and the staff - mortal and vampire alike - stood on constant vigil for any outward indication of impending trouble or violence.

In the time since his admission to Sanctuary, Lucien LaCroix had been remarkably cooperative, even docile and pliant upon occasion. His therapy sessions with Dr. Peter Bloodworth were generally insightful, becoming more provocative after the forced departure of his human lover Evie. The young woman's leaving was a catalyst, Peter noted, for Lucien's more defensive attitudes. He challenged observations by his doctors, he questioned everything, and when replies were not to his satisfaction, he grew sullen and introverted. In time, Peter knew, Lucius would turn combative. The shell encasing his mind would pierce and shatter and the demon within would once more emerge.

The vampire inside him stirred more restlessly with each passing day and soon he would resurrect and reclaim the night.



"The change is becoming more rapid, Peter," Dr. Sofia Jergen addressed her colleague and lover. They stood together at the banister of

the second floor landing, an optimum observation point for the tastefully appointed recreation room below. "When did he begin smoking cigars again?" the attractive brunette psychologist asked.

"A few days ago," Peter Bloodworth replied. When he shook his head negatively, his single gold earring tinkled faintly. "I realise we went into this fully cognisant that he would revert, but ever since Evie was sent away, the changes are coming with amazing alacrity."

"As though her departure was the impetus for his transformation," the woman observed. She upturned her lovely face and her delicate hand grasped her lover's arm. "Or, are these effects due to the visitor's arrival?"

He faced her. A moment's thoughtful silence passed between them. His left fingers caught a stray curl at her smooth cheek and tucked it behind her ear, then he offered a small smile.

"Well, can it be so, Peter?" Sofia insisted.

"We cannot dismiss any possibility, however implausible," came his answer. "Consider, love, who would have ever imagined LaCroix could perceive himself as mortal, living a twilight existence which defies all precepts of vampirism?"

"Peter," the darkhaired woman spoke with a trace of hesitancy in her voice. "What if there are others like him? We may have become complacent in the belief that when one of us became ill he or she either came here or to Lucerne or Tibet, or the patient ceased to exist. For all anyone knows, there could be others out there among the mortals, mimicking their lifestyles and ultimately placing them and our own at risk."

His tone sharpened. "Not complacent, Sofia. No, we have become arrogant in our immortality to believe something so humanly accessible as mental illness could be equally as evident in our society. And in today's world," he added with a wily smile, "such behaviour will not be so easily dismissed as demonic possession. There was a great deal more security during the Dark Ages, m'dear."

Sofia's gaze returned to the patients in the lounge below. Her slender arms came about her in a self-hug, almost as if she felt a sudden chill. Her lover noted the gesture and crew close behind her to slide his arms about her slender waist. She leaned back against his chest. "I wonder," she mused quietly.

"What, m'darlin'?" the former buccaneer asked.

"I wonder if any of the folklore is true?" she continued.

"About the visitor," he confirmed.

"Yes," Sofia nodded. "I wonder if there truly is a race older than ours, an order of eternal beings who have no known beginning and who have none of the restrictions we know. I wonder if the one coming is one of these beings."

Peter brought his face close to his mistress' and he pressed his furred cheek to her face. "And I wonder why each of us sensed the presence of one whose name we don't even know."



"You may call me Demetrius," the tall blond man smiled at the pair. Again they exchanged quizzical looks and finally Marcellus spoke. "But, my lord, it would be ... disrespectful to address you so casually."

"It is my name, Marcellus," the grin grew broader with his answer. "And surely you two aren't going to traipse about carrying my imaginary cloak and genuflecting each time I speak to you. Well, are you?"

Another shared look of confusion.

Marcellus said, "But, my lord, what would others think if we were to treat your status with such informality? You are, after all -" And his words were lost.

Antony appeared no more assured to a proper response.

Their mutual consternation, not terribly dissimilar to that of a pair of adolescents being dressed down at a British public school for some infraction of charter law, brought an eruption of laughter from Demetrius.

"My lord?" the tribune's confusion deepened.

Demetrius shook off his laughter but retained a glow of amusement on his handsome face. "Just how do you see me, Marcellus?" he asked quietly. "As a king or some form of alien being or, worse yet, some sort of god?" Before the Enforcer could stammer a reply, the tall pale man continued, "I am none of these things in truth, though my age merits the status in most persons' eyes, and admittedly I am somewhat alien from you for reasons which cause me both anguish and anger. And while there is a great spiritual force - call it what you may - there are countless demi-gods, for lack of a better word. Many have thought of me in deific terms but I have not encouraged such belief," he concluded solemnly. "I'm certain you can steel yourselves to do the unmentionable and call me by my proper name."

Antony's broad shoulders shrugged in response to his commander's questioning glance. Enforcers, it should be noted, rarely exhibit such confusion, and it was a state of mind Marcellus did not relish.

"And now," Demetrius came closer to them. He was taller than either of the soldiers. "I must find lodging."

"The Lady Janette has prepared a suite for you at the Raven," the tribune said. "We would be honoured to serve as your body - er, escorts," Marcellus paused, then added, "Pater."

A near humanlike softness filmed Demetrius' classic features. "Ah, it has been a long time since I have been called 'father'," he told them. "But this pleases me greatly. Bene."

The officers hurriedly freshened and dressed in streetclothes. As they prepared to leave the loft Antony retrieved Demetrius' luggage but he was halted by a strong grasp on his arm. The young centurion skidded to a halt, a look of questioning surprise on his face.

"Satisfy my curiosity, Antony," Demetrius posed. "Do you ever speak?"

Mischief twinkled in Tony's bright blue eyes. His head nodded towards his superior and he grinned. "Only when he lets me."

He was rewarded by an imperious look of reprimand by his commander - but the visitor roared his approval as he led them towards the elevator.



She lingered on the verandah of the hospital in spite of the bitter cold winds and whipping gusts of snow. Her mind churned as haphazardly as the weather surrounding her small dark figure. Alexa Eden Foxworth, like the others in her 'famille', sensed the auspicious arrival of the mysterious being from — where, she queried to herself, and why do I feel kinship with one I have yet to see? Innately, she knew also that this arrival had something integrally vital to the drama which had been played out here at Sanctuary these past months. A quiver inside what should have been her soul gave up a mantra of hope mingled with intense pain. Alex sighed, pulled up the hood of her long wool coat, and she shut her pale grey-blue eyes. So much pain, too many memories, far more confusion than we ever anticipated - the phrases rolled over within her brain louder and louder, day after night, moon after icy sun, session after session, over and over, never ending. An immortal litany to the madness who carried the name Lucius LaCroix. She wearied of playing a role in the charade, she felt soiled and dishonest - yet the doctors had agreed that her cooperation was absolutely necessary to insure his slow and healthy recovery. Lucius had to be drawn back into the community carefully, manipulated into a non-aggressive mental health. As a physician, Alexa doubted the possibility this could be achieved; she'd witnessed his accelerated slide into darkness in spite of Peter and Sofia's valiant efforts and she firmly believed that darkest part of his nature could never, would never be converted ... much less purified as they hoped.

Alex opened her eyes. Snowflakes lay heavily on her long lashes. It was like peering through a lacy fringe, she thought. She blinked rapidly and saw more clearly.

Time was evaporating for her. Lucius would regain his vampire self, he would seek out Evie. He would find Alex. He would see with truth that which had been hidden by his insanity.

She would have to make her attempt before he reached that truth.

The small woman sucked in a deep breath of cold air, turned away from the darkened ominous woods below the porch and she returned to the questionable security of Sanctuary.



"I'll bid you sweet dreams, Lucius," Alexa lightly brushed his cheek with her chilled lips. Something prompted her to feather her fingertips across his brow in sincere fondness. In spite of the strangeness of the drama they both participated in, the woman found herself genuinely concerned for his well-being. There was a trace of real affection after these many months of co-dependency even though she had attempted to remain emotionally removed from his plight. She turned to leave his suite but he caught her hand in his fingers to halt her. "Yes, was there something, my dear?" she asked with a tilt of her head.

He now held her hand captive in his large expressive hands, his fingers curving and sweeping each finger carefully, most gently. "Why aren't you warm like Evie, Angeline?" Lucius asked pointedly. He brought her fingertips to his thin mouth and kissed them lightly, then pressed her palm against his face. His azure eyes wore a haunted look of pain, of confusion, of something indecipherable. "Why don't any of you feel warm to the touch?" Lucius permitted a tiny sigh to escape his breath. "Maybe it's this place, I don't know ... but I've begun to feel cold as well, did you know that?"

Alerted, Alex brought an assuring smile to her generous mouth. "Have you mentioned this to Peter or to Sofia, Lucius? Do you feel unwell?"

"Unwell?" he parroted. "No, not unwell, just not ... quite ... myself."

She swallowed bitterness, "Oh, and how do you feel not yourself, cher?"

Still retaining her hand in his, Lucius took several steps towards the leaded glass window which overlooked the front courtyard of the institution. Below the grounds and trees were glazed over with a new blanket of snow that glimmered in the moon of this clear autumnal night. "I don't know really," his voice was very soft. "But I find myself not minding the cold as

I did when I first came here and I don't seem to mind the night either. There's a sort of peculiar safety in darkness, have you ever noticed?"

"Yes, yes, there is peace in the night, Lucius," Alexa agreed quietly. "Of course, most people tend to be frightened of the night, I think."

"How could anyone possibly be frightened of something so ... perfect?" he gazed up at the sliver of moon. "I find myself drawn more and more to the simplicity and perfection of darkness, did I tell you, angel?" His shoulders rolled in a small shrug of nonchalance. "Then again, what need have I for sunlight and brightness without my Evie?"

"You miss her very much," it came out as a plain statement of fact.

Lucius turned away from the window, a hardness filtered over his captivating blue eyes. He let her hand drop from his fingers. "Why do you persist in asking such inane - quite stupid questions?" His timbre elevated in a flash of all-too-familiar anger. Then as quickly, the anger dissipated and he returned to the small woman behind him. He hugged her, "Please forgive me, Angeline. I ... I didn't mean to become cross with you, but I don't know how much more of this forced separation I can possibly endure. It's been months but it feels like several lifetimes and I despair I'll never see her again."

"I don't suppose asking you to be patient would be very welcome advice," Alexa began. He opened his mouth to speak but she crossed his lips with her fingers to silence him. "And so, I won't ask!" she added pertly.

Lucius' mouth creased into a smile. "Ah, perceptive and wise - how terribly unfair of you to know just how to keep me in check. I never realised how lethal you could be."

She froze within, coughed up a silted laugh. "Oh, I rather doubt if there's anything at all lethal about me, Lucius." She eased out of his embrace and fetched her cloak and hood. She went to the door.

"Isn't there?"

This time the edge to his voice harked back to the dark times. Alexa knew she didn't imagine the underlying meaning to his remark. "Good night, Lucius," she told him.

He was facing the moon once more, lost in a twilight world of his own unstable making. "Do remind Nicholas I should like to see him, won't you?"

"Of course," she said. Her hand went to the doorknob and she opened the heavy wooden door with a slight tug. "Be sure to rest, cher."

Lucius LaCroix pulled himself straighter, hands clasped behind his back military fashion. "I have all day to rest," he said in the same

unemotional tone. "Good night, Angeline, and travel safely." He cast her a chilly glance, his lips pursed smugly, "One never knows what terrors are hiding in the darkness."

She left the bedroom, shut the door firmly behind her and walked towards the corridor which would lead her to the office of Dr. Rupert Wallenstein.

Alexa had to find her own sanctuary. The future depended upon it. Nicholas depended upon it.



The old man scuffled back to the dusty, cluttered mahogany desk and he dropped the books there with a noisy thunk. He took Alexa's face in his gnarled paws and he regarded her with immense affection and respect. "You know that you were always my favourite, don't you, Alexa?" He pressed his dry thick lips to her forehead and kissed her. "You are a physician, a healer, my dear girl," he reminded her quietly but firmly. "Surely you must know the incredible danger involved in this effort of yours. Ask yourself if losing your last life is worth the cost of this knowledge."

She looked up, the thick veil of unruly golden hair nearly covering her pale eyes, eyes which were red-rimmed by weariness and the early onset of tears. "Rupert ... what else can I do?" she asked in a little girl voice. "We've never been this close to reversing the curse. We've never had such clues to give us a path to follow ... yes, I must try, especially now -"

The sentence hung in the pipe-scented room, incomplete.

The aged doctor shook his head with a tiny bob and gave up a clucking sigh. "Oh my, oh my, Lucius ... yes, he is quickly reverting back to his old self. We've all noticed it but after your conversation with him tonight there can be little doubt that the vampire will break through sooner rather than later."

"In direct proportion to the gestation of the child," the woman added, She bit her lower lip nervously. "It is all some sort of nightmare, Rupert, a cauchemar of unfathomable depth. Do you think he knows?" she asked.

"I think he suspects," Dr. Wallenstein concurred. "In all my time with your people, Alexa, I have never known a damphir, never witnessed a Culmination, and I never shall in my lifetime. There is no stopping this, my child, the scenario was set in movement by Lucius himself and he will never know until the time comes of what he has sired. He must have an enemy of extraordinary dimension to have willed this to happen."

"Can we do anything to prevent the Culmination?" she asked then.

Rupert leaned back against the desk, propping himself on the edge of the furniture. He reached for a briar and with deliberate ease, he filled in from the humidor and readied to smoke. "No, not really," he informed her. "It isn't as though we're dealing with a deformed fetus and we can choose to abort. The damphir is most likely perfect in every way and by its very nature will not be prevented from birth. Or so we have been taught down the centuries."

Alexa Foxworth shifted slightly in the club chair, touched her finger to her wide mouth, a thoughtful habit. "Is it at all possible that Culmination can be prevented if Lucius changes somehow?"

"You mean like some sort of conversion into righteousness?" he posed. The doctor sucked deeply on the pipe and permitted a fragrant cloud to circle his greyed head. "An interesting concept, but I have grave doubts about any sort of thing like this ever happening before."

"Then there is no possibility for redemption for either of them?" she asked.

Rupert's small dark eyes appeared faraway in thought. At length he replied, "I should think redemption might be feasible - it is a radical concept I admit I have never considered until now, but then, as Peter is so fond of reminding us, who would have ever conceived a notion as radical as a vampire believing himself mortal? He reached forward to touch her hand. "Do not worry so grievously about this, Alexa. The child has yet to be born and there are eighteen years or so before any of this becomes of paramount importance. We cannot prevent what Fate has deigned to happen."

"Fate, Rupert?" she asked rhetorically. "Fate or an unseen enemy who may be spent centuries preparing for what lies ahead?" Before he could answer, she continued, "And what if Lucius is only part of the target? What if the entire 'famille' is destined to be destroyed?"

"Then I imagine, my dear," the old man half-grinned. "Your personal quest takes on more immediate importance, does it not?"

"Yes, it does," Alex nodded. She gracefully rose to her feet. "I am guesstimating the purge and healing should take perhaps five nights, not unlike the initial detox from any other addiction."

"I have been accumulating the various books and items you want but I am unable to secure the drugs you feel are necessary for this experiment. Your shopping list, Alexa, resembles an addict's concept of heaven. Dr. Leary would highly approve, I am certain."

"I can get whatever drugs I need, Rupert," she told him.

"Street drugs," he chirped with a touch of anger. "I do not approve! How do you know what you're getting?"

She lightly laughed, "Really, doctor, what are you worried about? At least we know drugs can't kill me."

His head tilted to the left. "Are you so certain about that?" He noted her perplexed expression. "If you are successful, my dear, a great many things can kill you, including this concoction of cardiac stimulants, hallucinogens, and whatever else you plan to use. Yet, I fully realise you are committed to doing this and I will not make an attempt to stop you. You won't mind if I pray for you though, will you?"

She wrapped her arms about his neck and hugged him fondly, "No, no, I won't mind one bit, Rupert."

"You're afraid, aren't you?" he hugged her back.

She pulled back slightly before admitting, "Very afraid, but very determined."

"When shall you begin, my dear?"

A quiet calm flushed her face, the look of reserved confidence on the face of a woman in love.



The Raven was capacity-filled in spite of the horrific weather. Patrons drank and danced away the night, embraced by the smoky sensuality of the place, mindful only of one another and which bed they'd share that icy evening. The arrival of three dark-dressed men caused little disruption to the noise or congestion on the dance floor, but the vampires gathered in the club were instantly alerted to a presence in their midst. They did not approach Demetrius as he was escorted through the room, but each nodded respectfully, each mentally transmitted their greetings of welcome. The impressive man in black Inverness coat returned their welcomes in silence. He was pleased at the response his arrival had provoked.

Marcellus guided the small party towards the back rooms. At the entrance to the elevator leading to the second floor, they were met by major domo of the club, Miklos. The slight dark Greek felt his heart swell in excitement and he fell to his knees and averted his eyes. Touched by the gesture Demetrius pulled the vampire to full height and embrace him. "Miklos," Demetrius' voice honeyed with affection at meeting another from his land. He greeted him in Greek, kissed both cheeks and proceeded onto the elevator.

Miklos felt the tracks of red tears on his face. It had been so long since he'd heard that sound and like all Greeks, the vampire wore his emotions proudly.

This was an auspicious night.



Antony knocked once and opened the double doors leading to the living room. He was followed by Marcellus, who addressed the elegantly dressed beautiful young woman standing inside the parlour. "My lady," he began. "We have the honour to introduce -" His words were halted when Janette propelled herself forward and into the open arms of the visitor.

"Demetrius," she cried out gleefully.

The Enforcers were baffled by the suddenness of the scene.

The visitor towered over the delicate darkhaired female and when he eased his hold on her to better look at her, Janette appeared to be doll-like in stature beside his height and powerful build. He stroked her smooth pale cheek, ran his fingertips across her brow and through her luxurious silken hair. "How exquisitely you have grown," he murmured with admiration.

Janette closed her eyes and burrowed deeper into the man's embrace. He smelled as she vaguely recalled of warmth and a spice not unlike cinnamon. Her dainty redtipped fingers grabbed the leather of his coat and pulled him tighter against herself. "Pater ..." she sighed. "Pater."

Demetrius kissed the crown of her head and pressed his cheek to her hair. "My child, my dearest child," he said in a voice choked by pent-up emotion.



It was a stain, the beat cop first imagined, something dark against the purity of the newly fallen snow which alerted him to locate the crime scene. Officer Ronald MacArthur, a fifteen year veteran of the street patrol, flipped on his torch and traced the ever-widening stain - now clearly red and undeniably blood - to a battered steel door in a dimly lighted alley. He withdrew his revolver, scanned the terrain and noted that the entire area appeared abandoned. *Even the rats are hiding from the storm*, he thought grimly. He called in the report and as he was an experienced professional, he waited for backup. In the years he'd served the Toronto police department he had discharged his weapon only twice and he was proud of that fact. Moments later, lights breaking through the darkness of the alley, without the customary siren, a squad car crunched to a stop at the mouth of the narrow passage and a pair of uniformed officers fell into place behind him: Dave Mallory and Connie Rodriquez.

"We'll follow your lead, Ron," Mallory drew beside him, poising his Smith and Wesson upright, close to his side.

Connie squatted to better observe the bloodstain in the snow. She looked up, large brown eyes wide and pretty beneath the fringe of brown-black bangs peeking out from beneath her uniform cap. "Fresh," she informed them quietly. She pulled herself to full height, a slender five-eleven without high heels. Taking out her pistol, she asked, "Front or back?"

MacArthur considered the situation, then replied, "Whatever it is, it's in here." He gingerly checked the door, it was not locked. "On three," he ordered.

The trio entered the decrepit building and were met with silence. They followed the trail to another door; light, pale and yellow, flickered underneath. The same motions followed, only inside the second door they came upon the remains of a particularly gruesome ritualistic scene.

No one wanted to take bets on which of the three would toss first.



"Well, this is nasty," Detective Don Schanke remarked sardonically as he surveyed the crime scene. The filthy long-since-forgotten warehouse room was cluttered with police, technicians and evidence. Focus was on what appeared to be a makeshift altar comprised of crates and boxes draped in colourful but cheap bit of cloth, mostly white decorated with handpainted symbols in every imaginable tone of paint. The illustrations were crude in execution but fairly easy to discern as to subject matter. A pedestal was featured in the centre, candles in tall holders graced either side. Plates and bowls filled the gaily patterned Caribbean cloth on the floor in front of the altar and they were filled with all variety of cakes, vegetables, fruits, breads, eggs, gemstones, beads of every known colour, gourds made into rattles and jugs of what one presumed was liquor in some form. A large wooden crucifix was propped against the pedestal while a carved huge snake curled about the stand and rose up above the upper base.

It might have been a kaleidoscopic folkscene from the islands if the area hadn't been polluted by carcasses of dead chickens, a black cock and the victim.

"One John Doe," said Dr. Natalie Lambert after a cursory examination of the area and man killed before the altar. "The victim is a Black male, maybe mid-twenties or early thirties. We won't be certain until after the autopsy. But we do know he was murdered, or sacrificed more likely, in what can only be surmised to be a ritual of some sort. His throat was cut by an extremely sharp blade wielded by someone with a great deal of strength

and experience. The cut nearly decapitated him. Then he was summarily eviscerated - neatly, perfectly, expertly. The intestines, for instance, were lifted out and placed in a kind of artistic pattern about the cavity of the abdomen." She scribbled in her notebook and turned to a photographic technician, "Jimmy, please get me a lot of shots of the patterning of the organs. See if there's any way you can take an overhead shot. I just get the feeling there is a purpose to the way this was done. It certainly wasn't spontaneous and whomever held the knife, took great care to do this stylishly."

"Stylish?!" Schanke shot back. "Aw, come on, Nat, this is the work of a psycho, not some friggin' artist!"

"Actually, it looks more like the work of a bocor," Nicholas Knight observed quietly as he circled the crime scene.

"Boca-what?" questioned Schanke. "Speak English, Knight, por favor."

He shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his overcoat and took a lingering breath; this was making him feel entirely too uncomfortable. Crime scenes, dead bodies, even blood - he was quite accustomed to maintaining his composure during investigations; however, this grisly tableau regenerated memories he'd been recalling far too much the last few weeks. He looked up and away from the body to his partner and the lovely Dr. Lambert. "A bocor is a sorcerer for the 'culte des morts,' the cult of death."

"Oh, yeah, that santeria shit, right?" the portly cop shook his head negatively. "Yeah, and some Dudley-Do-Right lawyer will somehow manage to get the asshole off who committed this crime under the banner of freedom of religion. Cripes."

Nick moved closer to the altar, "No, not santeria, Schanke, this is voodoo, albeit the darkest side of the faith."

"How can you possibly tell the difference, Nick?" Natalie demanded.

His hand swept the air to gesture at the components making up the scene. "The candles are dark blue which are for subduing, white for strength and truth. Someone was making a point of setting the stage to extract the truth from our John Doe while getting a definite statement of power to the followers attending this ceremony. Everything here smells bad or evil, or 'caco' as the believers called it. Look at the markings on the walls, pillars, altar itself. It's all black sorcery. Even Damballa is on a downward spiral."

"Dam - huh?" another confused question from Schanke.

"Damballah, the serpent," the fairhaired Nick Knight informed his partner. "Symbol of the universe and the most easily recognisable of the voodoo loas, or gods."

"Okay, so this is a voodoo rite, I'll accept that," Don admitted grudgingly. "But why is our silent friend there wearing a tuxedo like he'd going to a wedding?"

"Formal dressing of the corpse is done at a funeral," Knight quickly responded.

Natalie studied the display and glanced back to her friend, "But, Nick, this man had to have been dressed formally prior to the murder. Are you implying he came to a ceremony with the expressed idea of being the sacrifice du jour?"

"Hey, maybe the shmuck didn't know," Schanke chirped before Knight could respond. "Maybe he was dead before he got here."

When Natalie shook her head to disagree the bounty of her mocha locks fluttered about her shoulders. "No, Don, the victim was killed at this spot. He was not moved here, I can guarantee that much."

There was a roll of the cop's thick round shoulders under the dark brown overcoat. "Nah, you're missing my point, doctor," he amended. "Maybe he was only semi-dead before he got here."

Nat permitted a clearing of her throat, "Semi-dead?"

"Sure," Donald Schanke motioned with his ball-point pen to the corpse on the floor. "Maybe he came here under his own steam and they finished him off as a sacrifice."

"Willingly came here, Don?" Natalie chided. "It makes no sense."

"Does if you're a zombie," his round face creased with a Cheshire Cat smile. "Hell, everybody knows those guys do whatever they're ordered to do - after all, they're sorta dead already so what's all-the-way-dead to them?" He sought out his handsome partner, "Right, Nick? You're the voodoo expert, what do ya think?"

Nicholas straightened his spine against the imperceptible chill wiggling there. His jaw tightened with memories of the past and in a terse voice, he answered, "I think you might be closer to the truth than you'll want to be." He left the warehouse without another glance or word.

Don Schanke watched his friend's hasty departure with a bewildered look. "No shit," he was heard to mutter under his breath.



A tall voluptuous woman with skin the tone of warm taffy observed her followers preparing for the Saturday night ritual, the ceremony of Petro.

Freckles kissed her high broad cheeks and the cleft between her generous breasts, her hair was thick and naturally curly and more like a mane than a headcovering. Later when she danced before the fire, her abundant hair glinted as with flame. Her eyes were black, twin points of obsidian, the sign of the visionary. She wore several scarlet skirts and a formfitting violet bodice, which was covered at the moment by the luxurious length and breadth of the infamous peacock shawl supposedly presented to her by the emperor of China. Her long neck and her wrists were festooned by chains and ropes of carnelian and amethyst and pearls and malachite chunks. She was every bit a gypsy in appearance, but to those gathered here in the delta, she was their queen. She was Marie Laveau.

And the queen was not happy.

"You ought not to remain where you are not wanted, LaCroix," Marie said with vehemence to the tall Anglo also observing the preparations for the rite. He was quite attractive in a cold sort of way, the woman was quick to admit, although not nearly as appealing as his affable charming companion Nicholas. LaCroix carried about himself the aire of death while the younger man had more warmth within, something very much alive in spite of his state of unlife. Marie was not frightened by vampires, nor the loup-garou (you could hear them howling during the fullness of the moon in the bayou). They were, she felt, creatures of God and creatures of Damballa as well. Different from men but with the same basic needs and desires. Such beings had always co-existed in the voodoo world, like the Church and the loas. Balance is what kept heaven and hell separated. She knew these things because she was Marie, just as her mother had been before her and her grandmama before her.

But that one, LaCroix, he was imbalance. He did not belong in her city, among her followers.

"I stay wherever I like, Marie," LaCroix snapped imperiously. He cast her a harsh look, "You should remember that I know what you are thinking."

"Then you must know that I consider you to be nothing better than a slave owner, excrement from the plantation," the raven-haired woman snapped back with a slight smile. "I am not afraid of you, Lucien. You may have convinced some of them -" she tossed her dark waves towards her flock assembling around the bonfire, "- that you are truly the Baron LaCroix but you will be seen for the impostor you are."

"You would be wise to enforce that belief, ma cherie," the platinum-haired vampire told her. He drew near to her and pulled his mouth into a

thin smile. "You, more than anyone here, knows that I am the true angel of death." His longer fingers played with her thick dark waves, "I could give you immortality, my Marie, we could traverse the ages finding new followers, gaining new worlds to conquer."

Her moist lips curled in a smile and her lashes fluttered coquettishly, "Ah, but I am immortal, Lucien, and I will live on long after you. It is the way of the loas." A harder edge came to her eyes and mouth. "You only know the immortality of darkness. And I have no desire to become one of your - creatures." The final word came out with hatred.

LaCroix pursed his lips and laughed, "Now, now, my dear Marie, I think it was an absolute stroke of genius on my part to create zombies."

"I have heard the stories, Lucien," she pulled her hair from his grasp with a twist of her head. "Your young friend Nicholas told me how you devised using the African slaves for your feeding when you first crossed the ocean, how you created the zombies - half-dead so they would do your bidding without question, half-alive so their blood remained fresh and ready for your taking on the voyage to the New World." She spat on the dusty ground. "Plantation mentality!"

"I rather think of the zombies as my own lagniappe, you know, 'a little something extra'," he found this terribly humorous. "They were of no use to anyone, ignorant animals living in the jungle, and I gave the blighted souls a purpose."

Marie wrapped the shawl tighter about her smooth tawny shoulders. "You ought not to speak so poorly of living things, mon ami," the witch reminded him. "There are forces far stronger than you or me and they don't heed that sort of talk against free living things."

The one eyebrow cocked ever so slightly, his voice pitched to a low growl. "Nothing is free unless I will it so, especially among the followers of voodoo. To them I am Baron LaCroix in every sense and I stand between life and death because I can truly make their lives a living death if it suits me."

She felt the flush of anger in her cheeks. "Your plantation mentality will destroy you, I promise it will. I have seen it happen."

"Don't think your petty curses can affect me, Marie," LaCroix told her sternly. "I'm not a slave to the fears that govern voodoo, and I was not born of slaves like your followers and I go where I want, when I want, and when the time comes that I have exhausted life here, I will leave New Orleans and find fertile ground somewhere else." He stood close, his chest brushing against the fullness of her unrestricted breasts. His breath, icy

and hinting of mint julep, touched the warm flesh of her face as he spoke. "I will take what I want, Marie, and if I want you, I will have you." His hands cupped her breasts and squeezed lightly. "You know that, don't you?" his coldly attractive face creased with a lascivious smile.

Marie stood her ground and did not flinch. Her black eyes narrowed and she brought her face even closer to his, close enough that he could smell the citrus lingering in her mouth. "You can take me, Lucien, take me anyway you wish." His face wore growing confidence, he caressed her again. "Oh, oui, you can take me and tear me apart. You can make me one of your zombies and keep me and feed from me until you tire of my Cajun blood. You can even take me across the threshold into your dark world and make me stay with you for all times. But know this, Lucien," the beautiful witch said proudly. "You can only take me - you will never have me."

His well-manicured fingers slid down to her rounded hips. "Maybe I only want to take you, Marie, maybe I don't want to have you."

She laughed gaily, "That is the first intelligent thing you have ever said to me. Even with all of your fine education and worldly knowledge, you are like all of the other plantation owners. You are ignorant! You are a stupid fool!"

Angrily, LaCroix thrust the voluptuous woman against the trunk of the banyan tree they'd been standing under. "Bitch! If I hadn't sent the right people to you for your questionable hairstyling and beauty treatments, you would still be eking out a feeble existence along the docks, and more than likely peddling yourself for that pimp John who likes to think of himself as hungan. You already belong to me, Marie, taking you would be no massive step forward."

She uncoiled her spine and rubbed her back against the bark of the tree sensuously, "I am not your slave, Lucien, nor are my people. New Orleans has always been a free city to people of colour. Maybe it is you who are the slave."

Haughtily, LaCroix half-grinned, "Me? If you believe that, Marie, then John has been feeding you too much of the ganja to keep you pacified. I have never been a slave."

Her expressive long fingers stroked the tree slowly, "Oh, I think maybe you are, mon cher, you are every bit a slave to the darkness and to your thirst. And, Lucien, you are enslaved by your vanity and your unquenchable loneliness."

His jaw tightened. "You're mad."

"Am I?" Marie asked rhetorically. "All my life others have said I was mad, fou, here in the head, because I have the sight. I see everything, Lucien, and I know your secrets and I know what will come of your secrets. You will never be free of your hunger, or your loneliness. I feel your pain, Lucien. I pray to Ezili that she might protect you."

"I don't need your loas, Marie," LaCroix spat back at her. He was visibly shaken; he knew enough not to question the prediction of one born with a caul, as Marie had been born.

Her thick black waves began to undulate as there was movement in her hair, and then the green mottled snake slithered over her bare shoulder and around her long throat like a living necklace. She paid it no attention. LaCroix was fascinated and repulsed. The serpent now encircled her waist and rested its head between her full breasts. Her hands caressed the coils and scales of the snake with erotic touches. "Damballah knows the future, Lucien," she gave the serpent a loving glance and it flicked its tongue at her lips. "You will know the fate all plantation owners know, you will learn the fate of the slaveowner. For your sins against my people and for this hideous offence of zombies, you will learn what happens when slaves break their chains."

"I have no fear of you. Marie, or this bourgeois faith of yours," Lucien LaCroix defied her. "I have been a magician. I know the tricks, I know the illusions. I am *not* impressed."

Marie brought the gleaming snakehead to her inviting moist lips and she kissed the living symbol of the god Damballah whom she worshipped. Now two pair of black eyes stared back at the tall vampire in all his white cotton splendour. His long elegant form was backlighted by the ever-growing bonfire being assembled for the ritual. The pristine whiteness of his costly garments reflected the rows and rows of candles blazing about the clearing. Drums were starting their rolling thunder and the delta air was heavy with the odour of flowers, fruit and tobacco. The bayou was fertile for the arrival of the gods this night, for tonight Marie Laveau would dance and the loas would ride her. She would be 'crise mystique'. The witch queen would beseech the gods to make right what had been wronged to her people two centuries before by the tall blanc slaveowner who had come to Dahomey in west central Africa. She would beg the loas to swallow his thirst, his unholy thirst.

Lucien LaCroix spun on the heel of his boot but she called out to him and he turned back to face her.

"Anything conceived in bondage rebels and rises up to destroy the one wielding the whip," the ravishing enchantress said in an unfaltering voice. She glided away from the banyan tree, the serpent content in her hold. The air tinkled with the jingle from her many bracelets and ornaments. "Lucien, mon amour Lucien, I will set you free at a time of my choosing, and the hand that brings an end to your loneliness will be mine. Never forget that. I will never leave you, and when the moment comes, it will be me who will bring you across the threshold. Adieu, Lucien, mon ami."

Marie Laveau sauntered proudly passed the vampire and the intoxicating scent of her perfume lingered on his body long after he had returned to the city to inform Nicholas and Janette they were departing. He had tired of Cajun cuisine, he had told them with a smirk.



It was a place where time ceased to turn, it was a place where gods and people mixed and became as one. They gathered for her, for the statuesque darkhaired witch who was their queen. Marie Laveau prayed to the loas with her entire being this night. She had made her promise to make right the evil done to her people two hundred years prior and tonight she would start the retribution. As she spun and twirled in her frenzied dance, her curvaceous figure seemed buffeted by scarlet waves, the many layers of her skirts splashing against her hips and thighs like blood. Her mocha skin gleamed with a patina of sweat and anointing oils and with each spin of her possession, the ether caught these scents and wafted them over the congregation. Others now were taken over by deities and moments later the outdoor temple was a living pinwheel frenzy of drum music, gourd rattles, naked limbs, every imagination colour of cloth, and the incessant chanting which grew in intensity.

"Pito Muri pase m'kuri,
Viv le libete!"

"Better to die than run away,
Long live liberty!"

The rites continued long into the night and crested in the hour before dawn. Believers, exhausted by the dance and sheer excitement, lay sleeping while a few indefatigable ones swayed to the dying beats of the rada drums. Then the drums too were put to sleep, as the Voudons are fond of saying,

and the embers glowed less vibrantly in the fire. The place was a mixture of slumbering worshippers, puddles of candlewax and saturated odours of flesh fruit and heavy cigar smoke.

Marie sat alone, cross-legged, her skirts about her like a multi-hued circle of reds and pinks. She had never felt more alive or more united to her gods. Their spirits filled each fibre of her being, raced through her mind and throbbed in her heart. She felt the seaspray against her lovely face. Hu, the god of the sea, the one the English called Neptune, kissed each of her precious freckles and she smiled pleasurably. No erotic encounter could surpass this night's possession, she knew, for she had given herself totally to the commitment of her promise to free her enslaved brothers and sisters and, more importantly, to seeing justice done to the being of darkness who had begun the zombie existence among her ancestors.

She saw clearly what the future would bring far beyond the sixteenth day of June, 1881, the day she knew she would die to this life. She knew she would be born again and again for Marie was the queen and the queen would exist as long as voodoo existed. Her promise of retribution would follow LaCroix for years, for centuries even, she sighed sweetly, ah, but the moment of his taking would be unexpected, unstoppable and by one very close to him. One of his making.

The dark eyes peered across the expanse of the gulf where only the faintest outline of the moon still lingered. The witch raised her soul in prayer to Lisa, the Dahomey genii whose providence was the moon in all its phases and she beseeched the comely goddess to be mindful of the man responsible for her people's pain and enslavement. No real harm would ever befall him until the moment of his deliverance. Lucius would know his unquenchable thirst and he would know unending night and he would know the unrelenting pain of loneliness. He would see his children leave, he would see others die; he would, like the sainted Peter, experience betrayal and denial, but he would not feel harm until the time of her choosing. What began two centuries past would end nearly two centuries in the future. "The beginning is the middle," Marie Laveau would oftentimes say from that night on.

The spiral had begun, as she had promised.

A chilly morning breeze ran over her body and when she sought out the moon once more, it had been blown away and the silky gold tendrils of dawn clawed against the azure sky. Weariness came with the dawn and her wondrous raven eyes felt scratchy with the sand of sleepiness. She finished

her cigar, doused it and crumbled the remains, then tossed the debris into the water as a final offering.

A stab of pain convulsed her, cutting across her groin and digging into her femaleness like a gardening hook.

She felt the purge of sticky warmth between her legs and lifted her skirt to see the widening scarlet blossom on her undergarments. Marie tossed her wild dark mane and joyfully laughed as she raised her bare arms to the bright morning, in prayerful gratitude to Ezili for granting her the honour of being her own blood sacrifice. The pact was sealed! She rose to her full height and dove into the chilly water, into the welcoming embrace of Damballah, keeper of the universe, guardian of water, and she felt his satiny coils caress her curves. Her blood mixed with the water as she swam with the serpent, and the loa would be pleased.



The medicinal cold of the morgue was welcome on such an icy night. "Anything would be better than chugging around in the damn snow," Don Schanke grumbled. "Why does this shit always happen on the very worst nights of year? Every time we get a storm or the Playoffs are on, I swear, it is a gigantic plot to make my life miserable."

"Death, contrary to the story, does not take a holiday," his handsome partner was quick to remind him. They walked together towards the domain of Dr. Lambert. "I'll be very curious to know Nat's findings on this one."

"Seems to me, my friend," Don said as they neared the autopsy theatre, "that you've got a great fount of personal knowledge about this voodoo stuff already. So, give it up, Knight. Where did you learn about all of this crap?"

A small shrug rolled off Nick's broad shoulders. "I lived in New Orleans for a while. You are pretty much surrounded by it down there and I suppose unconsciously, I picked up bits and pieces of information that have stuck in my mind."

They reached the double doors of the theatre. Schanke studied his partner's face.

"What?" Nick asked with a little half-smile. "What now?"

Schanke shook his head and pushed open the swinging doors with his large flat hands. "Just once I wish I knew whether you were telling me the truth or if this was some more of your usual I-don't-tell-anyone-more-than-I-have-to bullshit."

Knight clasped his friend's back affectionately. "You're growing paranoid in your old age, Schanke," he laughed lightly. "You're beginning to see conspiracies and deliberate mis-truths everywhere."

"Hey, I'm a child of the Sixties!" he protested with a pout. "It's my job to be paranoid and to expect conspiracies. This is an honourable vocation, I'll have you know."

"Well, this certainly was not an honourable way to die," Dr. Natalie Lambert broke in an elevated voice. Both police officers turned their attention towards the small woman standing beside the body of their John Doe.

"There's nothing honourable about murder, Nat," Nick's tone change to a more serious inflection as he drew closer to where she carefully arranged the sheet over the corpse.

"I didn't say that, Nick," Natalie amended. "I'm saying that if this man had been a willing sacrifice, for instance, at a religious rite he respected and felt necessary for his personal salvation, then I could almost comprehend the reason for doing it. After all, there have been stranger religious sects than this one down through the ages and many of them do demand blood sacrifices. But this was not religious rite in the true sense."

"Meaning?" Don then asked.

"Meaning," Nat explained. "That while the congregation may have gone to witness a perfectly acceptable voodoo rite, the priest or whomever was performing the rite had another motive in mind when he or she cut into this man. While the victim is perhaps twenty-five or thirty, his physical deterioration is equal to that of a seventy-year-old labourer. The calluses on his hands, elbows, knees and feet are thick and hard as leather, and his gums and palate show evidence of advance periodontal disease. He is undernourished and his wasted bone and tissue indicate that he hadn't eaten properly in quite a while and also, when he did eat, it was not what we would consider balanced or nutritionally sound. More than likely our John Doe is an illegal recently arrived from the islands." The slender pretty doctor pulled part of the covering sheet aside to expose a portion of the abdominal cavity. "You know that arrangement of organs at the crime scene?"

"Yes, what of it?" Knight asked.

Natalie retrieved forceps from the tray beside the examining table and carefully she peeled aside the flaps of flesh around the stomach wound. "It all seemed peculiar to me, how deliberately and carefully this was done, until I realised someone was searching for - and found - contraband."

"The stiff's a mule?" asked Schanke with his usual aplomb.

Natalie rolled her eyes, "Oh, Schanke, you have such a way with words. But yes, our John Doe was a mule. There is residue of uncut cocaine as far down as the bowel. I rather doubt if anyone cared if this poor soul survived much past the boatride than brought him here."

Nicholas Knight unfolded the portion of sheeting covering the victim's gaunt ashen face and he regarded the nameless man with sadness and controlled anger. "Someone convinced him he was doing a service for his loas, for his gods." He looked up at the man and woman, a few stray curls of golden hair tumbled over his forehead. "The poor in the islands hold the loas in great reverence and a hugnan or mambo controlling this one and any others was perverting the power of the priesthood to entice a follower to unwittingly commit a crime. Believers in voodoo - true voodoo, white majick - do not condone immorality or crime. It's a throwback to the Catholicism they all grew up with."

"Sacrilege," muttered Schanke. When Natalie and Nick looked at him quizzically, he replied sheepishly, "I remembered that from catechism."

Silently, Nick withdrew a loonie coin from his pocket and gently slid it into the unknown victim's parched lips.

"Nick?" Natalie asked softly.

The vampire, recalling the lore of the delta, looked towards her with a sidelong glance. "Out of respect, Nat," he stated. "Sew his lips together when you're done and leave the coin in place. Whoever he was," he cast a forlorn look at the dead man, "he deserves at least a chance at heaven in the way he believed was true."



A quick succession of shrill rings broke Nick's reverie as he, along with his partner, laboured over paperwork at the head-to-head desks. "Knight," he announced hoarsely. His mood lightened, "Oh. hi. Nat, yeah, I'm all right. I'm just a little pre-occupied. Alex is still up at the clinic and I can't say that comforts me very much." He shifted in his swivel chair, "Speaking of cold comfort, I noticed your bodyguard was nowhere in sight at the morgue. Or have you and Antony gone your separate ways?"

"I don't think it's funny, Nick," Natalie shot back. "Actually, if Schanke hadn't been here I would have asked you if your friends the Enforcers had withdrawn Tony."

He bolted upright, grinning ear to ear. "Tony is it? My dear doctor, just what's happening down at the lab these nights?" He permitted a tired little laugh to gurgle up his throat.

Exasperated, the young physician shook her head. Not that anyone noticed, of course. "Nick, Antony is here almost all of the time. You keep reminding me it's his job to be with me and, well, we've sort of become friends." A question screwed her pretty features. "Or, can someone become a friend with -?" Another rattle of her loose brown hair. "Listen, that's neither here nor there. I called because I discovered one interesting new bit of evidence: several feet of the victim's intestine has been excised and the organ was neither forced back into the body, nor has it been located in or around the crime scene. I can only surmised that whomever committed the killing took the organ part as a trophy."

Disgust pinched Knight's handsome face when he contradicted with, "No, the entrails or intestines are often used for the purpose of making a garrote, obviously for a weapon."

Natalie Lambert slid onto a high stool beside the counter she was working at. "But, Nick, I was given to understand that sacrifices are done by blade among these cults. Strangulation is a mob-style murder method, generally speaking. Please explain."

He noted his partner leaning forward, notepad and pen in hand.

"Don't mind me," Schanke announced. "I'm just taking notes from the expert witness. Shoot."

Nicholas spoke clearly and succinctly into the telephone. "There are secret societies within the voodoo community, not usually acknowledged by the practitioners because of the awesome sway these black sorcerers have. Most are descended from West Africa and their mere name instills fear into the people, which is what I think this entire case is centered on. I mentioned this looking like the work of a 'bocor' working within the 'culte des morts' and now I'm convinced that what's happening is a kind of magical gangsterism."

"You mean some Caribbean mob is using religion to subjugate people?" Don interjected. "This is just a weird form of extortion?"

"Yeah, except it involves the illegal transport of drugs inside people no one would even care to report as missing," the goldenhaired officer continued. "The worshippers sure as hell aren't going risk the wrath of the 'zobop' or 'zangbeto', who are these occultist gangsters. All of voodoo relies on manipulation of the mind. That's why it works." He took a laboured breath, "I would wager the next victim will show evidence of strangulation."

"The intestines," Natalie was repulsed by the concept. "What a world, what a world. Well, if I find anything more, gentlemen, I'll be in touch."

The completed report will be on your captain's desk within eighteen hours, barring unforeseen circumstances. 'Night." She hung up.

The hard click of high heels against the linoleum floor alerted both men. "Now, inform me as to your findings on this voodoo murder," Captain Amanda Cohen demanded. She crossed her arms, slipped herself comfortably on the side of Schanke's cluttered desk. Her gaze shifted from one detective to the other, "I'm waiting, gentlemen. Who goes first?"

Schanke gestured broadly with his hand, "Voila, the expert! Nick, care to enlighten the captain as to the magical gangster theory?"

Captain Cohen swerved about to face the younger officer. "Did he say 'magical gangster', Knight? I can barely contain myself waiting for this one. Please, begin."

Nick Knight dragged in the stuffy squad room atmosphere for a breath and slowly attempted to make the incredible tale sound feasible. Amanda Cohen, to her credit, remained implacable and attentive throughout the explanation. The only evidence of her incredulity was her slightly dropped jaw.



There was a clatter in the hallway, the banging of the outside doors, followed by the pounding of heavy feet running towards her office. Natalie Lambert felt the tiredness evaporate from her body and she woke to alertness at the noise. Her finger was poised at the hidden buzzer under her desk which directly and silently sent an alarm to the police officers patrolling the building. She gave up a pent-up breath and felt a smile film over her mouth.

Antony Signorelli, the Enforcer assigned to safewatch her during LaCroix's commitment at Sanctuary, appeared framed in the doorway, slightly disheveled but still remarkably appealing. His thick blue-black hair, usually so carefully styled, now fanned across his forehead, giving him a boyish look Natalie was hard to dismiss. "Sorry I'm late, Natalie," he stepped inside the office, his deep voice a bit breathless. "It's been one hell of a night and I just don't, I mean, I can't really explain, but I really want to tell you - oh shit, look, I didn't mean to worry you by not being here."

She shrugged, smiled, "I wasn't at all worried."

His features tipped down. "You weren't? Oh, I see." Tony now appeared a bit crestfallen and the doctor felt foolish at her choice of words.

Natalie rounded the desk and came closer. "Tony, I ... I didn't mean that I wasn't worried - I mean, I was concerned, of course, when you didn't show up and -"

His blue eyes blinked quickly. "You were?" he asked hopefully.

She took another step closer. The smell of his cologne, heightened by his running, happily assaulted her senses and made her feel lightheaded. "Lately I'm always concerned whenever you're not here or I don't know where you are. After all, you've become part of my daily routine, part of my life these last few months," she was stammering, she knew, but the words were all jumbled. Everything suddenly felt jumbled inside her. There was that quiver in her tummy again. She pressed her fingertips to her stomach to force the queasiness away.

His large hands were on her trim shoulders. "Natalie, are you feeling well?" The big man was concerned. "Maybe you ought to sit down for a bit? You want me to carry you somewhere?"

She began giggling, then laughing. The unsettled feeling fled instantly.

"What's wrong?" Antony asked anxiously. "Please tell me, what's wrong? Did I say something?"

Natalie Lambert looked up and felt the heat blush her cheeks as the laughter began to abate. She stood on her tiptoes and quite unexpectedly, circled his neck with her arms, "Yes, it's something you said. You're so very sweet, Antony, so very ..."

Their faces were a breath apart and the smell of him intoxicated her. He was holding her up. Her toes weren't touching the tile floor. There was a tremble in her tummy again, that incessant swarm of butterflies. She knew she ought to breathe but for the moment she'd forgotten how. She could feel the strong slow rise and fall of his chest against her breasts. It only added to her inability to breathe, much less to think. She shouldn't feel like this. It wasn't right, not normal. not something real, not something like -

"I missed you," he broke the uneasy silence. "I didn't think I would but I ... I ..." Harsh reality, his Code, splashed ice water to his thinking and carefully Antony eased the young woman back on to her feet. He stepped back to put more than a few navy blue buttons between their bodies. "Look, I'm sorry, I was way outta line, Natalie. Maybe I ought to ask Marcellus to assign someone else to this station. Let me just take you home." It was clear he was stressed by his spontaneous admission.

Silently, Natalie gathered a few papers and tucked them into her bulging shoulder bag. He was holding up her woolen coat and he eased her into the

garment, waited until she retrieved her keys and bag, turned off the lights and locked up. He followed her down the empty hollow corridor and as they reach the outside doors, the small woman halted her march, spun about and once more found herself dangerously close to him.

"Please don't asked to be relieved, Antony," Natalie found voice to say. She swallowed hard, felt a wetness come to her eyes. She was baffled as to why she felt so emotional. With trembling fingertips she reached up to brush back the black strands over his brow. "I would miss you ... very much," her voice had become tiny, waiflike.

Antony moved nearer and she felt the corridor wall against her spine. Their eyes locked. She sensed his large hands flatten against the grey wall and he bent towards her tiny frame, his handsome face coming closer inch by sweetly painful inch, until she was able to swallow the breath he gave up. Hesitant at first, he let the tip of his tongue moisten his lips, slightly parted. Natalie felt the brush of his mouth against her brow, her flushed cheek. She held her breath and felt the wetness of his lips against her mouth. It was chaste. To her surprise, his eyes were open as well. She could feel him smile against her mouth and she smiled back, then closed her eyes and was met with a more tender kiss. She yielded to the pressure of his mouth on hers, felt herself roll her hips forward to meet his when his tongue slid into hers and she whimpered, raised herself up onto her toes and felt his hands slide off the wall and about her slender waist. She was vaguely aware of not touching the floor and she was certain one of her shoes clanked to the tile when he lifted her up and closer to himself. She held the circle of her arms tightly around his neck, his thick dark hair curled about her fingers where her hand rested at the nape of his neck. The kiss seemed to go on timelessly.

At length Antony forced a space between their mouths, enough for him to say, "I think one of us had better breathe and I think it should be you. I'm a little better at holding my breath."

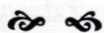
Natalie took in a jagged breath, felt her lungs fill with air and felt a blushing smiling curve her lightly bruised lips. "I think you are a little better at a lot of things," she said in a punctuated fashion, still wearing the same satisfied smile.

He rewarded her with a dazzling smile and kissed the tip of her pert nose. "Centuries of experience," he chirped. "I am a professional, after all." He eased her back into a standing position. "We have to leave. It's nearly dawn."

She took the hand he offered, lacing her fingers so neatly with his. "Tony?" Natalie asked softly, an edge evident.

The Enforcer caressed her fair cheek and as though prompted by his own feelings, replied, "Yes, we're in a whole shitload of trouble. But don't be afraid, Natalie, I'd die again rather than let any harm come to you."

He slipped on a pair of Ray-Bans and escorted the doctor into the grey light of pre-dawn.



The loft was still when Nicholas entered. A fire ebbed in the hearth, he noted, giving off the only light in the place, save for the vapoury streams of dawnlight inching through the protective blinds. There was a small bundle on the rug in front of the fireplace, rolled in a black and grey comforter, and he smiled. The light edged closer to the form and he moved quickly to shut the outside light before it did any damage. Nicholas stepped out of his shoes, let his overcoat and charcoal wool sports jacket tumble to the leather couch and he drew down to the small mound on the rug. A few stray strands of long, impossibly blonde hair scattered from the coverlet onto the floor covering. They felt like cornsilk beneath his touch. That small movement evoked a tiny murmur from the bundle, followed by a wiggle. Something scratched at his trousers. He watched with a bemused expression as fingers crept out from under the blanket like a spider and crawled with deliberate slowness and eagerness from his knee, sliding up his inner thigh, groping and finding and cupping his groin.

He gave up a deep groan, slid onto his back and flattened against the rug. The dark comforter rose up and consumed him in one deft movement, and a pleasant very familiar weight settled over his body, fitting itself like another skin. Nick opened his eyes to darkness, save for the twin points of golden light staring back at him. Before he could speak, a mouth devoured his lips hungrily and his mouth was assaulted by a tongue whose taste he knew. He felt her canines scrape against his tongue and mouth just as his own fangs began to emerge. He seductively bit down on her lower lip and relished the coppery sweetness of her blood trickling down his throat.

His hands, dampened and anxious, found her thighs. She was bare save for the fragrant scent of her blood racing in her veins and the slickness of bath oil staining her skin. He always thought she smelled faintly of vanilla cake, something purely satisfying. His fingers pulled her hips down in deeper contact to his own and he kneaded the fullness of her buttocks to make the touching more intimate yet. She pulled her mouth from his and with her sharp teeth, proceeded to shred his shirt. Buttons rolled onto the

rug. Somehow she managed to undo his belt and, much to his delight, buried her face in his lap. Nicholas felt the sensation of his trousers being unzipped and peeled apart, while her hands curled and furred against his chest and nipples. He imagined she was using her teeth to undress him. He felt her nibble and nip bits of his skin as she made easy work of the fabric. Her tongue coated his flesh with saliva. Her lips pursed and sucked at the tender flesh to arouse him, knowing full well each intense ministration would leave a swollen welt the next day. She suckled a few precious droplets of his blood in each mouthful of skin she teased. His breathing became laboured, broken by the gasps for release her lovemaking provoked. Her golden eyes brightened, narrowed, as the power over his coming became hers ... sharp teeth scraping against the hardness of his flesh, she pulled her face up and withdrew her mouth, thin wet tendrils lacing their flesh together still - and with a guttural animal roar she bared her fangs and sunk them deep into his throbbing artery, drinking deeply, filling her mouth with his blood and bringing him to an exquisite, draining crest.

Afterward, Alex purred as she licked the tiny sprinkles of his blood everywhere she'd played.



They greeted one another with a kiss, light and breezy, when they woke in the bedroom near to dusk. Nicholas rolled from bed and fumbled to retrieve the black velour terrycloth robe from someplace on the floor. The remnants of his garments were scattered about as well, he noted. He picked up a large-ish piece of his black trousers, examined it and tossed it over his shoulder nonchalantly with a grin.

"Good thing you're rich, Nicholas," Alexa said in the semi-darkness of the room. "At least you can afford to keep making love with me."

"We do tend to trash a lot of clothing, my love," he said with a smile. He faced her, attractive face screwed into a query. "Just what is it about the tearing of clothes and sex, Alex? I've never quite understood the correlation."

"Youthful exuberance?" she answered coquettishly. She tossed her messy hair and it flounced about her naked shoulders and breasts with careless sexy disregard.

Nick laughed, "I love when you do that." He sat on the edge of the bed.

"What? Strip you with my -" she began.

"No, no," Nicholas muttered, drawing closer. "No, I mean the way you do that little thing with your hair. It gives you a kind of, I dunno, just-fucked look. I like it."

She kissed him. "You're so easy, Knight."

"Yeah," he kissed her back, harder. "But never cheap."

"Except for clothes," she reminded him sweetly. Then as suddenly as she'd been playful, Alexa's mood turned introspective and serious. "Nicholas, we need to talk," she said quietly. Her lover drew beside her, tugged the comforter and sheet up to cover her skin. He didn't need the distraction, he told her. Now domestically cuddled together in their connubial bed, they broached the unmentionable.



The silence permeated the room heavily.

"It's deadly, Alex," Nicholas broke the quiet at long last. The sentence had come out raw and strained.

She sat in a chair opposite from the rumpled bed, swathed in a deep blue floor-length robe loosely tied at the waist with a self-sash. Her knees were pulled up to her chest. She wore nothing else except for a cloak of confidence. "I can see no other way, Nicholas, and my time is running out. Lucius is on the threshold of reverting. You must know the danger this poses."

The planes of his face hardened. "And what of the danger in what you want to do?" Before she could answer he added, "I don't want you doing this, Alex, it's not worth the risk."

She raised her chin defiantly. "This risk is mine and I do so willingly for you. It is what you wanted, Nicholas, being mortal again, isn't it?"

He hesitated before he answered. "No, not at so high a price as to lose you forever, Alex. There has to be another way. There has to be."

"And what are we to do, bide our time while Natalie Lambert plays with her theories?" she shot back.

Nick's eyes flared. "Why are you suddenly so negative towards Nat? You certainly have nothing to fear with regards to her. I thought you knew that."

The woman rallied back, "I know what I believe to be the way to cross back and it has nothing to do with Natalie's ideas or experiments. She cares about you, she wants to help, but she isn't one of us, Nicholas, she cannot possibly know the hunger and the drive to quench it." She slowly rose from the chair, oblivious to the way the robe separated to reveal the curvature of her breasts as she glided across the room towards him. "You

know what the thirst is like. You tasted it in my blood when we made love, Nicholas," her cool fingers skimmed his cheeks. "You tasted the need and the desire and you know it never goes away. It goes on and on, night after night, year after year, century after century. Endless and forever," she whispered. Her moist full lips caught his upturned mouth in a lingering kiss. "In perpetuum."

His arms, strong and tight, coiled about the column of her body and he pressed his face to the damp cleft between her breasts. He kissed the tender flesh, pressed his cheek against her chest and he heard the faint revitalised beat of her vampire heart. His blood pulsed in her veins, his blood gave her life for a transitory time. The reality of making believe they were human lasted only as long as their blood fueled one another, a shared ruby drop created a single heartbeat. Nicholas shuddered and he felt his lover embrace him more fervently. Her hand gently stroked his thick tawny blonde hair, a simple action that nearly always calmed him. "I want the night to end, Alex," his voice pitched low. "Only that I might see the morning. I want to be free again."

She held his head to her bosom and moaned when his nuzzling gave way to a slow steady sucking on her nipple. His teeth grazed her flesh, she felt the dampness between her thighs and she yielded to the raging desire roiling inside her. The woman eased herself down onto his lap, wrapped her legs about his waist and felt him all around and inside her, consuming her entire being. She gasped, swallowed the air, "Free me, Nicholas ... free me ..."

They loved with the intensity of a final embrace. An immortal coupling.



"What is it about time, why are we so obsessed with it, with the length of it?" Lucius LaCroix posed as he stood at the uncurtained windows of the expansive private consulting room of his psychiatrist.

It was the moment just before nightfall, that gloriously serene time when the sky still wore a ruffle of violet at the edge of the earth. Below the world was wearing a new dress of snow and it reflected silver in the rising moonlight. It seemed a night for lovers and dreamers.

"Are we to discuss time this evening, Lucius, or the broader subject of man's place with it?" Dr. Peter Bloodworth asked. He sat at his carved desk, a souvenir of his buccaneering days. "Are we to touch upon the metaphysical at this session?"

Lucius spun about, a small flare in his light blue eyes. "That is so damn infuriating! This incessant habit you have of answering one of my

questions with one of your own. Is this the way all of you conduct your sessions?"

Peter's aristocratic face wore a warm smile and he rose from the chair. "Actually, Lucius, I will readily admit to you that I have always been more than a little aggravated by the customary form of interrogative therapy when I have been the one on the couch, so to speak, but it has yet to be disproved that it is the most reliable way to conduct a session. It is universally acceptable by most therapists, I believe."

The one perfect eyebrow cocked. "You've been in therapy? I'm fascinated, Peter, is this also a common thing, for one's therapist to have been in therapy?"

"Actually, more common than you might imagine," the psychiatrist admitted. "It is simply good mental health for those of us in the profession to regularly undergo maintenance therapy. I feel revitalised and clearminded."

"Interesting," LaCroix commented. "A moment ago, I called you Peter. Was it wrong to use your Christian name, or are you even Christian? Perhaps you're like our Dr. Wallenstein and a Jew." The deliberate bite to the words offended Peter but he disregarded the implication.

"I told you when you first arrived, Lucius, you should call me whatever name you feel most comfortable with," the Britisher reminded him. He toyed with his golden earring, a habit he was barely conscious of. "As for being Christian, I was raised C of E - rather, Church of England - but I espouse to no particular faith. I rather like to consider myself a humanist."

"Really, a humanist," the tall gingerhaired man parroted. "Then again, Peter, everyone here could be considered a humanist, correct?"

The doctor was alerted but unflustered by his patient's tone. It wore an edge. "Do you feel I, or anyone here, has treated you any way but humanely, Lucius?"

His mouth pulled into a tight mocking smile. "I didn't imply that I had been treated with anything but care, Peter. Yet I find it rather peculiar to employ the term 'humanist' or 'humane' when in truth, no one here is quite human. And neither am I."

"And just how do you see yourself, Lucius?" Peter asked pointedly.

They faced one another and were evenly matched physically. Peter was fully cognizant this was the opening move of a chess match.

Lucius chose his words carefully and with great deliberation. "I am more than what I appear to be. I have begun to sense I am more than just a man." He permitted his doctor to digest the words. "I know I began to feel

this way after Evie was forced to leave - and please, Peter, don't insult my intelligence. I am fully aware that she was sent to the west against her will. Since she's left, the days and the nights have little meaning for me, though I seem stronger, more alive, at night." He rubbed his large expressive hands together as he spoke and he wore a distant look in his eyes. "I know I hear the thoughts of Dr. Jergen's Romany servants, and lately I know there is an appetite inside me neither food nor drink seems to satisfy."

"And what do you think you are if not a man, Lucius?" Peter Bloodworth asked slowly.

LaCroix's expression was cold, resolute. His voice was pitched low, only slightly menacing. His gaze was icy, unwavering. "Someone," he stated clearly, "someone whose presence provokes fear."

The bearded doctor studied his patient's stolid expression. "And how could you possibly surmise something so nebulous, Lucius?" he asked him quietly.

LaCroix closed the space between them with a single step. He permitted a faint smile to etch itself on his mouth, then replied, "Because I can see it in your eyes, Peter, and I can hear it racing in your blood." He brushed passed the psychiatrist, opened the door, and walked out into the sedately decorated hallway.

For several thoughtful minutes Peter lingered at the windows of his office. He then made three telephone calls: his associates, Janette and Marcellus.

The entry he made in his patient file stated this would be the final session.



As All Hallows approached, even the children on the reservation were caught up in the tradition of carved gourds and strange masques and dimestore costumes. There would be a small party at the Centre, the usual bad run of terribly poor horror movies on the local network television station and undoubtedly a few of the brothers would get juiced and cause a little mayhem down at Hazel's place. "Well, at least none of the kids wear cowboy costumes," Matthew Grey Wolf chuckled as he walked through the town with his newly arrived guest.

"I have always found this to be a good holiday." Shandra Dominico offered one of her rare smiles. "After all, Matthew, it's the one time of the year we can commingle with you without fear of being discovered."

"Hahn't thought of that," the Native American shaman admitted. "'Course in my line of work, there's always been mingling."

"I think that's why I feel so comfortable here on the res," the Enforcer told him as they strolled towards the entrance of the cavern area. "I've never felt hunted or hunter here."

He paused, halted in his dusty footsteps. "You can stay but you know the rules, Pelt," he used his pet name for her. She'd won the name because of her black thick hair cut straight and helmet-style; he said it reminded him of the pelt of some small fierce animal. "No feedin' off the natives and you respect the rules of the circle."

"It's tempting, Matthew," the large woman craned her neck, straining to catch the last roundness of the sun through her double-black sunglasses. "But I took an oath of loyalty and I doubt if I can persuade Marcellus to let me remain here indefinitely."

He winked, half-grinned, "You leave that to me. Your boss owes me a few favours. C'mon, we'd better get down to the caverns. Sun's going to set." They turned together and began the descent.



Magenta tongues sliced the deepening sky as the sun gave up its last hot orange streaks. There was a rustling sound, a piercing whine of unearthly dimensions as the caves opened and thousands of bats took leathery wing for their nocturnal quest. The young woman, who had adopted local dress, stood silhouetted on her nightly perch to watch the eventide flight. A desert breeze caught her loose flaxen hair and the hem of her ankle-length gauze cotton dress. Her face was tanned, reflecting golden in the sunset.

"She's quite beautiful," Shandra observed after removing her glasses. "Moreso than when I first saw her at Sanctuary. Then she seemed only a lost child caught in a woman's body, but now, she seems to have blossomed here, Matthew."

The Native American offered, "A true desert bloom."

"Yes, she is," the vampire agreed. "I still find it difficult to believe ..." Her thought was swept up by the dry desert breeze.

Matthew shoved his weathered hands into the back pockets of his worn Levis. "Oh, ya gotta believe it, Pelt. The spiral of life's begun and like any whirlwind, this ends in destruction. It's a force of that no one, not vampire, not man, can stop. That there is serious majick."

Shandra's green eyes never strayed from the solitary female in white. She would remain as guardian for as long as she was needed and she would lay down her life rather than have any harm come to the simple young woman. It seemed preposterous to her to protect the girl, but laws were

made to be enforced and she had given her word to serve and protect centuries before.

The Amazon kept vigil. She could hear the minute throbbing, the near-silent flow of blood and she was drawn to it. She would be a kind of guardian angel, albeit of a startlingly different nature than those sporting gossamer wings and spun-gold halos, and she would not fail.

With infinite grace, Evie turned away from the mouths of the emptied caves and she smiled as Matthew and a familiar statuesque woman approached. The medicine man took her hand and helped her down from the rocks she'd been standing on. Sweetly, she hesitated, looked up at the older woman and greeted her, "Hello, Shandra. Thank you for coming to protect my baby."

Evie's delicate hands went to the gentle swell of her belly. "We both knew you were coming," she added innocently.

She began the walk back to the village. the tall dark man and the vampire guardian following her in silent procession.



"I'm glad you've come to visit me, Nicholas," Lucius greeted him warmly. He embraced the younger man, kissing both cheeks in customary fashion. "I don't see you as often as I would like."

"I must apologise, Lucius," Nick told him as they sat close to a toasty hearth in a small music room reserved for guests. "But my caseload has been incredibly busy these days and while I realise that's a feeble excuse, I'm afraid it is the only one I can offer. I'm sorry." Nick was plainly uncomfortable, actually bashful.

"No, no, I hope you don't think I was reproving you," Lucius inserted quickly. "I think I'm feeling my confinement more these days, Nicholas. It's been months but it feels like centuries - and you know how tedious that can be." He swallowed a small laugh under his breath as he withdrew an expensive cigar from a sterling silver case and prepared it for smoking.

Knight felt unsettled at LaCroix's remark; he would have felt the same even if Janette hadn't informed him of Peter's encounter earlier. His body language did not go unnoticed by his companion.

"I seem to be doing that to a great many people lately," Lucius sputtered casually. A swirl of costly smoke floated towards the inlaid ceiling.

"Doing what?" Nicholas rallied his composure, crossed his leg and eased back in the luxurious leather club chair. The deep cushion felt pleasant at his neck.

"Setting people on edge," his melodious voice rose in emphasis. His smile looked permanent. It reminded Nick of the smug smile LaCroix always sported. "But tell me, young Nicholas, what dreadful crimes are keeping you from your old friends?"

"Crime of the season, I suppose you could call it," Nick Knight replied, grateful to be away from the topic of his own ruffled interior. "My partner and I are investigating the ritualistic murder of a recent illegal from the Caribbean, we think, and it could possibly involved drug trafficking. The usual," he added wearily.

"But why a crime of the season, Nicholas?" the gingerhaired man inquired. Another vapourous cloud rose.

"It's nearly Hallowe'en and this involves voodoo," he answered. "I suppose that too is a feeble excuse or reason but it has become second nature for me to find connections in occurrences and circumstances."

"Hm, how very peculiar," LaCroix looked thoughtful.

"My thought processes?" the blond detective sat up a bit. "I realise there are times my thinking is atypical, Lucius, but I've never considered it peculiar."

He rattled his head, touched a finger to his lips as he considered something. "No, you misunderstand, Nicholas, not your thinking, but mine. You just said something that provoked a thought in me, this concept you have about connections between occurrences and circumstances."

Nicholas sat straighter still, aware and alert.

"Just now when you mentioned voodoo," Lucius said intently. "It was most peculiar like I said, but for some unknown reason I had a sudden thought that there was a connection between that and my being here. Isn't that odd?" He pulled deeply on the cigar, relishing the richness of the Cuban blend. He rolled the cigar between his fingers and offered a lascivious grin. "You know, it is rumoured that these are handrolled on the bare thighs of women. It's probably why they taste so damned good. Care for one, Nicholas?" He proffered the case.

"No, thank you, it's not a vice of mine," Nick waved the offered away.

Lucius LaCroix dragged his cigar again and blew a ring in the air. "Foolish, boy, one ought to indulge one's vices. After all, a little hedonism goes a long way."

"If you say so, Lucius," Nick agreed.

"Funny, it happened again, just now," the older gentleman sat forward in his chair. "I just recalled that I knew a woman once who smoked cigars, a black woman and from the delta region, I vaguely remember."

hear something? What? I don't look forward to spending all night out here trudging around in the snow, you know."

Nick plodded towards the larger man, his appealing face tugged into a masque of confusion intermixed with the tiniest twinkle of illumination. "You know, Schanke, I got the funniest feeling just then."

"Oh great, now you're sick and you're gonna throw up or something!" Schanke rolled his eyes and bellowed. "This whole investigation is nuts. Nothing is right about it."

Nick clasped the man's back affectionately and offered a gentle smile. "No, I'm fine, Schanke. I'm not sick, believe me."

"You never get sick," Don muttered. He felt a shiver in his bones again. "Hey, can we at least walk? I don't want to turn into a people-sicle." They began their trek again, each armed with a lighted torch. "So what's wrong, Nick? All kidding aside, you've been acting hinky ever since you came back from visiting your friend at that sanitarium or whatever. Your friend that whacked out?"

"On the contrary," Nicholas remarked. "He seems more and more like himself."

"But that's good, isn't it?" He urged their footfalls towards a vacated storage building.

Nick Knight shook his head slowly. Flakes of snow danced about as they fell from his fair curls. "That's the funny feeling, Don. It's a feeling that his coming back to himself isn't all that good because the person he was before his illness is somehow -" he paused to select the proper word "-connected to what's going on here or in the village or wherever."

This time Don Schanke caught and held on to his partner's coat-sleeve. "You think this guy's somehow implicated in these two voodoo killings?" His tone was serious cop.

Detective Knight again rattled his head as if to clear his muddled thoughts. "I don't know how to explain it, Don, but a very long time ago, he lived down in the region where voodoo flourishes and he was a kind of participant in the rites - not the kind we're investigating, mind you, but he was important within the voodooist community and a lot of what he believed or created down there, took root."

"So, lemme get this straight," Schanke spoke with deliberate caution. "This friend of yours may have started something strictly kosher, voodoo-speaking, but somehow our magical gangsters have perverted the whatever and somehow it's tied into the two murders and the drug shit. Is that kinda what you mean?"

Nick couldn't hold back the nervous laugh. He ran his gloved fingers through his abundant light-coloured hair. "You know, it sounds really stupid when someone else puts it into a simple statement. I must be losing it, Schanke. Just forget I ever brought it up, okay?" He began walking towards the wide hollow building, pointing the beam of his flashlight towards the semi-wide bay doors.

He became aware he was walking alone and he revolved around, focusing the light to where Don knelt in the snow examining some object in the snow.

"What is it, Schanke?" he asked as he neared the other man.

"You keep paying attention to those funny feelings of yours, Nick," Detective Schanke demanded. He trained the light down to where his black Oxford had swept away the newly-fallen fluff of snow.

Nick peered down. It was pinkish, watered down blood, dissipated by the wet snow. A pair of terrified small black eyes stared back at the officer and when he bent forward to examine the object, Knight saw it was a freshly slaughtered cock's head. There was a red satiny ribbon tied about the portion of the scrawny neck that was attached to the black feathered head. It was a clean cut.

As though silently prompted, Don Schanke commented, "Sharp knife, maybe a machete if these guys are from way down south. The black cock isn't good, is it?"

Knight squatted close to where the animal head lay in the snow. "No, it is generally associated with 'bizago', which is black magic and evil practices. We'd better have pictures taken before we bag it and we'd better call it in. Whatever happened tonight happened someplace in the immediate area." In unison the policemen stood up. "Let's just hope we don't find another goat-without-horns."

"Lemme guess: a person intended as a sacrifice," Schanke's pleasant face twisted in disgust.

"Right," Knight's chest heaved with a sigh. "This is truly mad."

"Hey, Nick, be grateful we found it," Don reminded him. as they began the trudge back to the car to call in their findings and to request a forensics team. "It's been my experience that it's usually that little extra something that can make or break a case.

The unease roiled through Nicholas' body. "Lagniappe," he said to the night air. When Schanke cast him a questioning look, Nick complied by adding, "It's an old Cajun term for something unexpected made as an offering or gift. Lagniappe," he repeated.

Schanke shuddered, "I can think of better presents than dead chicken heads, Knight." He started to ramble as they crossed the yard, "A red Porsche, Michelle Pfeiffer, season tickets for the Blue Jays, John Lennon's guitar -"

His comical litany rose to the stormy clouds coming in from the north.



In the cold hours just before dawn the discovery was made in a long-forgotten storage area beneath the pilings of a rarely used dock. For all practical purposes, the room had been transformed into a 'houmfo', or temple for the practice of change and, more specifically, for the practice of black sorcery. At the far end of the 'houmfo' was a cordoned off area not unlike a room. This was the 'bagi' where the altar and all of the objects used during a ritual ceremony were kept - bells, thunderstones, gourd rattles, voodoo dolls, pots to hold captured spirits, a sword (for Gu), every hue of candles, offerings for the gods, and on. The atmosphere reeked of rotted fruit, spent blood, thick incense, the smell of the sea, and the rank odour of decomposing chickens, cocks, a black goat and John Doe number three.

Candles still smouldered in waxen puddles in the circle on the floor that held captive the body of another nameless, eviscerated, decapitated stowaway in faded tattered clothes. The ceremony had concluded only a scant few hours before.

"Detective Knight," addressed a young uniformed officer named Bernard Rogert. He stood at a small door leading to a cubbyhole. "I think you'd better come here, sir."

Knight and Schanke moved away from the murder scene to where the cop shone his flashlight into the anteroom. Nick bent down to pass into the room, his blue eyes growing large and pitying. Schanke followed. "Oh, dear God," he gasped. "Is that -?"

Nick nodded slowly. "Yes ... zombie."

The man was slight, greyed black in skintone with glassy dark eyes, and he wore only worn shoes, no socks, old stained pants and short, no coat, no gloves. He appeared not to mind the icy weather or the damp of the place. The shell human squatted against the far wall of the tiny room, staring with lifeless eyes at nothing in particular.

Cautiously, Nick knelt before the being. Don broached, "Talk to him, Nick." He, too, came before the slave.

"He won't hear us, Don," the vampire said quietly. "For all practical purposes he's dead. We can lead him anywhere and he'll come. He'll eat what we offer him. He is totally docile, totally unaware of his existence,

and he will do whatever he's ordered to do." He looked at his partner. "Let's get him out of here."

Together the men guided the zombie out of the dank small room. Someone retrieved a blanket and wrapped it about his shoulders and he was taken to a squad car.

Natalie Lambert neared the detectives. "You realise, of course, that there is a genuine possibility that he's still carrying the contraband inside him."

"How did he get that way?" Schanke asked in his disbelief.

"I could say bad gris-gris," Knight said flippantly, "but that would minimize the gravity of the situation. In actuality, no one knows the precise formulae for creating zombies except that in modern times, it appears to be something called a 'zombie cucumber' or derivation of the puffer fish, all brewed together with boned and herbs and such. Whatever it is, the stuff deadens the victim and creates the perfect slave."

Dr. Lambert added, "Commonly, it is a tetrodotoxin in the form of a powder which is absorbed through the skin that emulates the condition known as zombification."

"How did you become an expert all of a sudden, doctor?" Schanke grinned.

"I cheated," Nat returned the smile. "I made a few calls and checked some books."

"Can it be undone, Nick?" Don then asked as the car pulled away and headed for the police wing of the metropolitan hospital. "Can you un-make a zombie?"

Nick Knight visualised the past, the boiling, floral-drenched past in the gulf, and he recalled the line of empty husks they'd offloaded from the ship after their voyage from the Old World to the New. They were the first of LaCroix's creations and he'd been grateful to his mentor for the fresh feeding during the lengthy journey - now he only felt repugnance, shame. Over the subsequent years LaCroix's invention became twisted by the use of elaborate and secret mixtures of weeds, seeds, fish and fowl and animal bits, nail parings, poisons - strong undetectable poisons. He caught the eye of Natalie's bodyguard, Antony; he knew their recollections were similar.

"I asked if there was a way to undo what had been done to that man, Nick," Schanke repeated his inquiry.

Knight shook himself free from his memories. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "Supposedly there is a ceremony performed which reclaims

the 'ti bon ange' - the soul of the taken one - by the living and gives it new form of some sort."

"Wété Mo Nan Dlo," Antony supplied the etiquette term for the rite.

Nicholas again cast a leveled look at the other vampire. "Yes, I nearly forgot the term."

Natalie looked up at her companion, brows knit in question. His glance was unreadable. She turned back to Nick. "I should get on to the hospital to check on the patient." She clutched Knight's coatsleeve and pulled him aside. "What's going on, Nick? I couldn't help but notice the little mutual exchanges between yourself and Antony. And what was that vague reference to the way zombies are made in 'modern times'?"

"Antony can explain as well as I can, Nat," he told her. "He was there, just like me." He said good night and returned to his associate.

"Natalie?" the darkhaired Enforcer drew near. "Are you ready to leave?"

"She stood her ground, demanding, 'You're going to tell me what this is all about, aren't you?'"

Antony answered, "Yes, I will."

"Everything?" she pushed.

His bright blue eyes hardened slightly, his deep voice answering, "Yes, everything, Natalie. I never lie. Never."

Natalie Lambert felt the power he'd hidden so carefully. It was intimidating.



Dawn rose on the thirty-first day of October.



Natalie Lambert sat on the couch in her apartment, throw pillow pulled tightly to her chest like a protective armour. She'd listened, asked questions, listened some more until it was long past dawn and the outside was flooded with a painful sunlight her tall handsome companion hesitated to tackle. The heavy thermal draperies were pulled tight against the light and it created a warm insulated oasis within. The young woman's thoughts were scattered, but her eyes followed the man's every movement, every little gesture. Even the way he stroked her cat Sydney as the furry beast kneaded happily in the man's lap.

"I should go," Antony said. "I don't think there is any immediate danger, at least not at the moment." Sydney's purrs grew in volume.

"He likes you," Natalie commented with a sleepy little half-smile.

Antony's mouth curled. "Animals seem to like me. It's one of the few human things I -" He caught his words, fell silent, and carefully eased the black and white cat from his lap. Sydney was not pleased but finally complied and contented himself on his favourite corduroy pillow in a corner of the couch. The vampire stood up. "I'd better leave, it's way too late and tonight promises to be important."

She looked up, appearing all the more vulnerable and appealing with her hair in disarray and loose about her face and shoulders. "It isn't safe," she reminded him. "The sunlight."

Tony shifted his weight from one hip to the other. "It's a hell of a lot safer than staying here," he said in a tight voice.

The blush felt hot in her neck and cheeks. Her warm brown eyed flickered and cast to the carpeting.

"It's getting difficult, Natalie," the centurion admitted. "I'm not supposed to get this way."

"Which way?" she timidly asked.

"Involved," came his quick reply.

Nat caught a tiny heartbeat in her throat. "Is it something I've done?"

"It's everything you are," Antony told her at length. "Every warm, living, beautiful thing you are. Every human thing you are, Natalie."

Gracefully, she set aside the pillow and rose to her full five-foot-four height. She was diminutive in her stockinged feet in comparison to his height in western boots. "I have something in the refrigerator," she explained sheepishly. "Sometimes Nick is here, or Alex, and I thought it best to have -" She sighed.

"Funny, but until you mentioned it just now, feeding was the last thing on my mind," Antony admitted. He seemed as surprised as she at the thought. He came closer, obviously unsettled by the new feelings inside him. "What I want is to make love to you," he told her shyly. "And I can't."

In all the time she'd entertained dreams of Nick, in those spells when they veered somewhat closer to a more intimate relationship, he'd never told her how he wanted her. When Alexa arrived, Natalie's fantasies took little hope of coming to be. Yet now, a beautiful, intelligent man was saying he wanted her and she was pleased and confused. Her own desired were gnawing inside. It had been such a long time ...

"For me too," Antony whispered. He closed the space by a foot. "Natalie," he asked in an unsure voice.

The memory of his mouth came back to her lips. "Yes?" her voice cracked.

He struggled with the words. "Would you let me stay? Let me just lay next to you, hold you, while I slept ... I can't remember what it was like ..." His words trailed off.

Natalie did not look at the soldier, but rather, she took his hand and guided him into her bedroom. It was serene in tone and style, softened fall colours, inviting and feminine. It was dimly lighted, only a faint hint of light coming through the taupe draperies. Carefully, the young lady tugged back the comforter and flat sheet ... he eased out of his black boots ... his right hand swept up the nape of her neck, gathering her bounty of hair up as he unzipped her simple blue dress ... it shimmied to the rug in a small wool puddle that she stepped out of ... she slid into the bed, her navy blue slip skimmed over the cool crisp linens ... Antony hesitated at first, then came down beside her, stretching full length, facing her ... only their hands touched ... their hands and their eyes ... he felt the Sleep take him over and she studied his face in repose, committing to memory his features, the curl of his black lashes, the telltale shadow of his beard ... slumber engulfed her ... his last thought was of her eyes - so expressive, rich brown, eyes he could fall into and endlessly ... endlessly ... end less -



The Raven would regale the holiday as it always had. Tonight mortals and vampires would cross the invisible boundaries and pour one into the other in a mingling of the blood. Costumes and masques would make each one an image of fantasy, alcohol would blur the edges, continuous music would enhance the theatre of the event. Tonight, as was tradition for the lady Janette, those of her 'famille' would arrive costumed, most selecting attire reflecting the time they were brought across. She encouraged such care to detail, especially this All Hallows Eve, as the visitor they had all anxiously awaited to meet would attend. It would be a kind of command attendance, the darkhaired beauty had told Miklos and the other employees of the club.

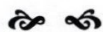
"Everything must be precise and perfect, mes enfants," Janette had told them excitedly. "No expence shall be too great and we should make a concerted effort to permit the mortals full enjoyment of the festivities. Pater wishes it."

"He's fond of them, isn't he?" Miklos asked curiously.

Veronica, of the Tribe, was perched on a barstool. "Pater seems to care for everyone, Miklos. He spoke with each of us last evening. He's not like ... so many others."

Janette clapped her delicate hands together. "True enough, but we waste time. Reception for our 'famille' will be held in the upstairs chamber. Demetrius wishes to meet our brothers and sisters so we will have to observe the courtesies. Now, of the invited guests, have any of the other families accepted the invitations?"

A lively discussion ensued. Janette was in her element and there was little question that the night would be momentous and memorable.



Miklos once again counted the various styles of glasses behind his bar. The numbers, of course, were always on the mark. He was a perfectionist.

"Miklos?"

He smiled and nodded. "All here, all accounted for, Janette."

She grasped his long fingers and squeezed tightly. "It's going to be wonderful, isn't it?" Her beautiful face had rarely looked so radiant.

"Of course, my lady," the Greek vampire agreed sincerely. "Janette?"

"Yes?" her smile broadened prettily.

"He's changed you." It came out as a statement with no implications of positive or negative inference.

"Yes, Miklos, Demetrius has changed me," the vampire admitted. She still held his hands. "We speak of so many things. He told me about my mother." Her vivid blue eyes softened. "How he loved her and how they had planned a life together. I can't believe ..."

"What, mistress?" the slender man leaned across the bar, resting his elbows on the polished mahogany.

She appeared childlike, her long lashes fluttered as she cast her vision to their entwined fingers. "I find it so hard to believe I'd forgotten so much, Miklos, so much of my life in the beginning. I'd forgotten Rome and Pompeii, and my little brother Rufio and my younger sister Divia."

He touched her chin with his thumb. "Princess," he so called her in intimate moments. "It wasn't you, it was never you. It was him, LaCroix. He infected your mind and made you misplace your memories, even your identity." He held her chin between his fingers and smiled affectionately. "That's the past. Now, now is the future and no matter what becomes of LaCroix, you can go forward."

"If there are other possibilities," came the vibrant male voice behind her.

Demetrius had come in from a walk in the late afternoon snow. Flakes still clung to his black Inverness and his boots, and his flaxen hair. His

cheeks were ruddy. He nearly mimicked being human. There was sunlight outside, after all, and he'd strolled in it. A vampire in daylight. It was an overwhelming concept.

He held out his hand and Janette took it happily, allowing the tall forceful man to guide her towards the elevator which led to the suites above the club.

Miklos watched them leave. He envied their closeness but was glad his mistress had found someone to depend upon and to feel protected by. Over the decades he had been servant, guard and friend, but Demetrius could and did offer something Janette desperately needed now. "Perhaps it is time for each of us to move on," the Greek said to the small antiquity he revered, which he had long ago ensconced in a small alcove behind his bar. "Tell me, Diana," he prayed to the goddess, "shall we find a new place to hunt?" He laughed under his breath and then he thought of home, those sun-bleached hills and wide endless beaches and the remnants of the civilisation he called his own. A pang of homesickness ached in his heart. Two hundred years away was a very long time.

"Other possibilities." The words revolved in his brain.



As the sun barely began to set over the city, Nick Knight and Don Schanke were back in the colourful confines of the Caribbean community. Children in costumes, both bought and makeshift, dashed up and down sidewalks yelling for treats on this night of tricks, and the merchants made offerings to the greedy little boys and girls. Candles glowed in profusion and their combined firelight grew in intensity as the sky took on her evening mantle. The snow began again, light and fluffy and oddly benign.

"I should be home," Schanke grumbled. "It's always such a big thing, you know, Nick?" He wore a grimace. "My kid's gonna be grown up and then what? All of this could be gone before I know it!" He snapped his fingers.

Nick blinked. He recovered after the ill feeling passed, and he pulled the big green Cadillac to the kerb in front of a dusty jammed-to-the-rafters concession store. Herbs and other unidentifiable dried bunches of vegetation hung in the front window. Vessels of clay and woven straw were in profusion, almost as much profusion as the cobwebs and dust in the place.

A bell jingled when they entered the small establishment. "What is it, Knight?" the heavysset detective asked as he shook off the snow from his collar and lapels. "Some sort of bargain basement witch store?" He craned his neck to take in the odd and peculiar items - stuffed animals and birds,

trays of rooster feathers, bowls of crow's feet, bolts of colourful ribbons, bottles containing, well, containing stuff he sure didn't want to know about.

"I do not traffic in bargains, detective," came a scratchy thin voice from behind the counter. A small swarthy old woman appeared from nowhere, dressed in tropical skirts and embroidered blouse. Her scrawny neck and gnarled hands were decorated with a bounty of rings and necklaces and bracelets, a weird blend of costly and very cheap. She shuffled into the dim light of the place and took a puff from her corn cob pipe. Blue smoke fragrantly swirled about her untamed grey-black hair and it filled the detectives' nostrils.

"I need your help, Mama Beatrice," Nicholas beseeched.

"You have waited too long, boy," the mama-loi reprimanded the vampire. "You ought not to be too like them -" she nodded toward Schanke "- not when souls are at risk, you hear?"

"I hear you," Nick apologised by his tone. "We have found a 'ti bon ange' and the 'houmfo' down at the dockyards and we need to find the source."

"Posse," the crone spat on the floor. "They act like 'malfacteurs', Niccolo, but they are gangsters, 'zangbeto', and they're bringing poison into the city inside those bodies you keep findin'." She brushed past the cops and made her way towards the front of the shop. It was closing time.

"Mama-loi, if you knew these things, why didn't you tell me?" Knight grew angry. "We might have been able to prevent some of the murders."

"Can't," she muttered. When she shook her head, the bones and beads she wore made a subtle racket. "You know better, boy, I can't interfere with bad 'gris-gris'! My people follow the true path and I'm a good Catholic, you know I am! I cannot fight those who follow the 'perfect duffant'."

"The what?" Schanke looked up from the notes he attempted to make while in the low lighting.

She waddled up to the large man and stood squarely in front him. She barely came up to Don's breastbone. Beatrice tapped the man's chest with her pipe. "You were a churchboy, weren't you?"

"You mean an altar boy?" Schanke asked. "Yes. ma'am, I was."

"That's good," she fondly patted Don's paunch. "You gonna need faith tonight, both of you boys, and that one, my Niccolo, he's got a little difficulty dealin' with some God-stuff." She carelessly upturned the pipe onto the floor and stamped out whatever embers remained. "Leave that for Zo," she told Schanke. "He does love fire and tobacco. Almost as much as Barbara, you know, Chango."

"What should we do, mama-loi?" Nick Knight asked again. "We're running out of time."

She crossed her arms and seemed to consider the situation before she responded. "Well, one thing's for sure: we got to stop these evil ones before any more bad comes into town. Then we gotta get a 'mort bon Dieu', a natural death, for the zombie." She motioned for the pair of policemen to follow her into the back room of the small store. A wiry dark man dressed neatly in an old brown suit and creme-coloured shirt buttoned to the neck came from the curtained entry as they approached. "Ah, Aristede," Beatrice grabbed the man's small hand in both of hers. "Go fetch Isadore. Tell him to bring back whatever he learnt today after I sent him out, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," her son said obediently. He rushed from the store, a jingle of bells signaling his wake.

"You knew we'd come, didn't you?" Nicholas did not appear surprised. "You sent someone out to find the information we needed, didn't you?"

She shrugged, satisfied with herself. "Maybe, could be. Come on, better you are not where red eyes can see you." She pushed both cops into the back room.



"So tell me, doctor," Lucius lay on the velveteen couch, clasping his hands behind his head casually. "Where have all the chicks flown off to? And to what do I owe the privilege of having you for therapy tonight?"

Rupert Wallenstein chuckled, "It's Hallowe'en, Lucius, and several members of the staff, including both Peter and Sofia, are guests at a private party." He took his place in a worn leather chair. An antiquated black leather notebook was positioned on his knee and he held a fountain pen in his left hand.

"Ah, yes, Hallowe'en," the gingerhaired patient repeated. He stared up at the intricately decorated frieze ceiling. "They'll be dancing and partying at the Raven tonight."

"You remember the Raven, do you?" The psychiatrist jotted a note.

He turned his face to the little Austrian. "I am beginning to remember a great many things, doctor. Does that frighten you?"

"Should it?" he countered.

"You're remarkably human, Doctor," he looked back at the ceiling. "Human beings are innately frightened of the unknown."

Rupert touched the capped pen to his mouth. "What makes you think I have no knowledge of what you so carefully are attempting to skirt?"

"Bravo, doctor!" Lucius swung his long legs off the couch and sat up. "Finally, someone worthy of sparring. Therapy was becoming tedious."

"Then we shall try to make it more stimulating for both of us, shall we?" the old man suggested. "Select a topic, Lucius."

"Something seasonal?" the perfect eyebrow arched mischievously.

Wallenstein's bushy brows wrinkled together like a furry caterpillar. "Seasonal? You have caught my interest, Lucius, please proceed."

LaCroix leaned back against the damask wallpaper and he extended his legs, crossing them at the ankles. "Do you believe there are ghosts, doctor?" he asked hypothetically.

"Yes, I do, Lucius," Rupert admitted. "Ghosts are part and parcel of my cultural tradition, as I am certain you already know. We believe in the influence of our ancestors." He leaned forward in his chair. "Do you believe in ghosts or spirits?"

"I can't recall ever having met one," the younger man said flippantly. "But I don't rule out the possibility." He then asked, "And you believe in witches, practitioners of the black arts?"

"I wouldn't cage the question that way," the old man told him. "I believe these people exist, have always existed, yet I cannot in truth say that I believe in their assumed powers."

"Yes, but Solomon practised the craft, did he not? And alchemy and numerology and such, and supposedly there are several books of the Old Testament that your scholars repressed long ago, correct?" he seemed assured of his information.

"Have you been studying the Talmud, Lucius?" Dr. Wallenstein was curious.

"Not that I recall," he was quick to reply. "It was just one of those bits of information that was suddenly there. You don't think this means I'm a closet theologian, do you?" he smirked.

"I rather doubt it," the doctor chuckled again.

"Do you believe in vampires?"

The word had finally been uttered. It came out as cold as a tomb.

Not flinching or showing any outward sign of fluster, Rupert countered with, "There are many kinds of vampires, Lucius. What kind are you referring to?"

Lucius LaCroix slowly, gracefully pulled himself to a sitting position, the flat of his expressive hands against the velveteen covering of the couch. Ignoring the question, the younger man studied the aged doctor with an admiring look. "You fascinate me, doctor," he finally said. "No fear, no

hesitation. Everything there is to know about me, you already know, and still, you persist in playing out this charade."

"Perhaps you are not so certain as you perceive, Lucius," the psychiatrist suggested.

"This time I rather doubt it," LaCroix tossed back. "You are gifted at clouding your thoughts."

"You can read my mind?" the man asked cautiously.

"Parts of it," the patient responded. "The parts you permit me to explore."

Rupert Wallenstein was astute in his observation. "My mind is not the reason you have been confined here, Lucius. *You* are the patient, not I."

"No, not a patient," LaCroix contradicted. "More like a specimen. I'm something this place has never seen the likes of before and I know I am not insane."

The Jewish doctor said nothing.

Those azure eyes hardened, iced over.

Rupert felt a chill in his bones which he valiantly repressed.

Lucius smiled. It was a frigid smile, intelligent in its underlying malice. "I may not even be - what was it you called it? Ah, yes, I may not be unsane much longer either, my dear doctor." He rose up, a column in black garments. "Thank you, Doctor, it has been a most enlightening session," he said most cordially. He went to the door and opened it.

"How do you plan to spend this evening, Lucius?" Rupert asked as he, too, stood up.

"Maybe I'll read a bit," he answered lightly. "But first, I think I'll have a snack. I'm feeling dreadfully peckish, for some reason."

"Would you care for me to join you?" the old doctor asked.

Lucius laughed. "Are you volunteering?" He spun about and laughed down the hallway.

Rupert Wallenstein picked up the receiver of his telephone and dialed an outside number. After several rings, someone answered. "My dear, you have no more time. I will expect you, as we arranged, just before dawn." He hung up.



Beatrice spoke in patois with her son and with a portly mulatto called Isadore. Nicholas was able to pick up minute portions of the conversation, but much of what was being said was gibberish to his ear.

"Hey, Nick, what are they saying?" Schanke asked in a hushed tone.

Before Nicholas could answer, the mama-loi interrupted, "Not much, altar boy." She looked from one officer to the other. "They have been on the streets from dawn and no one will speak."

"Shit," Schanke muttered beneath his breath.

"Do you kiss your wife with that mouth?" the old witch asked hotly. "Shame on you."

"Sorry, ma'am," Don's face turned crimson. Nick averted his eyes and felt his throat constrict with a laugh he held back.

Resuming her haughty little stature, Mama Beatrice moved to the counter and began pulling out containers, boxes and other paraphernalia. Magically, as she hummed and the two black men disappeared into the front of the store, two small cloth packets appeared in her veined hands. The sacks were red flannel, with red cord drawstrings. "Here, take one and keep it on you," she ordered Nick and Don. They thanked her for the sacks.

"Ouanga for your safety," the crone growled. "Now, you gonna have to use the zombie, Niccolo. He's the only one who's gonna show you where those gangsters are meeting."

"But he's pretty much dead!" Donald Schanke protested.

"So what's the problem, detective?" she yelled back. "He can't hurt nobody except those that hexed him."

"What do you mean, Mama Beatrice?" Nicholas asked her. The majickal bag felt weighty in his palm. He slipped it into his overcoat pocket.

She carefully plucked something from out of a cookie tin and wrapped the sugary-looking stuff in a piece of waxed paper. "This is my own recipe for 'tablettes' - that's pralines to you two." She shoved the small packet into Nick's hands, and curved her fingers about his tightly. "These be made with salted peanuts, okay? You get that poor soul out from wherever you're caring for him and you take him back to where you found him, then feed him my 'tablettes'. The salt is gonna rouse him. It's gonna make him realise what's been done to him and he's gonna be driven with a mighty strong hunger for vengeance. He'll find those evil ones like a bloodhound." She let go of Nicholas' hands. "Then, of course, he's gonna die for real."

"But that's like condemning the man to certain death," Schanke protested. "It's not right."

"No, no, it isn't right, young man," the old voodoo witch admitted sadly. "But his soul is already gone and he's living in hell. You'd be granting him peaceful death, like I said, a 'mort bon Dieu'." Her leathery fingers brushed against Don's roughened cheek. "You have a good heart, boy, and you mean well. But you don't know voodoo and you don't know what

torment this soul is feeling. Baron LaCroix plays with men's souls this way and it's not a decent thing to do. Zombies should have never been. Marie was right about that, isn't that so, Niccolo?"

Stunned by the connections of past and present, the vampire spoke solemnly and softly. He thanked her for her help, stuffed a few banknotes into the mason jar at the front door for offerings, which pleased her tremendously, and led his partner back onto the street.



"Hey, Knight, that was funny, wasn't it, the way she called that voodoo god LaCroix?" Schanke shook his head and readied to climb into the car. "It's a strange world, all this voodoo stuff."

"Strange," Nick's answer was monotone. His thoughts were racing, his gut was churning. He turned the ignition key and pulled into the festively decorated street.



"I can't condone this, Nick," Natalie Lambert insisted. "Doctor Cunningham managed to excise a reasonably good-sized package of cocaine from the patient last night, but I really don't think the man is in any condition to play fox and hounds tonight." She listened to his arguments patiently. "All right, you play this out as you see fit, but I am lodging a formal complaint if anything happens." She listened a while longer. Exasperated, she repeated her words, then fell into an uneasy silence when he spoke once more. "Yes, I am going to the Raven," she said into the receiver. "I was invited. Will you be there?" He said very little. "Take care of yourself, Nick, please. I mean it." He hung up without saying good-bye. She replaced the phone in the cradle and stood up from where she'd been sitting at the foot of the bed to complete her dressing.

There was a ring at the front door and Sydney meowed to announce the arrival of her escort. A date, she smiled to herself, it sounded preposterous. She headed for the door, still arranging her costume. "I'm coming!" Natalie flung open the door.

Antony wore the uniform of a Roman soldier. He was a vision of white, gold, leather and a scarlet cloak. He was plainly uncomfortable. He stepped past her and into the cozy apartment. "We were asked to dress as we did at the time we came across," the Enforcer informed the young woman.

"You look very ... impressive," she stammered.

"You look beautiful, Natalie." Antony smiled, revealing the dimples he disliked. Indeed, Natalie Lambert looked exquisite in a simple yet elegant

pale green Empire gown and ballet-style slippers. She carried a fan that was an antique. "It's a family heirloom," she once told her bodyguard. "Brought from France." Above her full, slightly rouged bosom there was a cameo, her great-great-grandmere's. It hung from a black velvet ribbon. She fashioned her hair up off her neck, dainty tendrils falling prettily like a frame about her face and throat. "I'm a little nervous, Antony," she stammered. "Being an outsider of sorts at this party."

"Don't worry," the blackhaired officer told her. "Tonight we're all the same."

He swept her away and left the cat cleaning himself; entertaining was a dirty job.



Marcellus was the first to see Alexa across the crowded dance floor as she entered the Raven. He sensed her presence even before he glimpsed her face; the sharing of blood during Morpheus lingered still in his sense-memory and it always would. The woman was dressed in dark clothing; the low lighting obliterated the tones to the mortal eye but the tribune saw she wore a full length burgundy hooded cape. He glided towards her easily.

"Alexa," her name tumbled from his mouth with deep affection.

She revolved about, her green-blue eyes peered from beneath the deep hood of her cloak and the density of her unruly fair hair. Seeing his formal Roman uniform, a warm honeyed smile melted over her full lips. "You remembered," she said above the din of music and clanking glasses.

He noted her Victorian gown beneath the cape-coat, the choker at her throat, the garnet earrings Nicholas had given her nearly a century ago. He approved, "Just like when we first met."

"Our first meeting was not this pleasant, Tribune Galen," she reminded him sweetly. Inside she was a rumble of anxieties and impending fears. She forced the feelings back, out of sight, out of anyplace where Marcellus or another of her kind could touch upon them. But she acted too slowly. And as she slid her hand around his arm, he caught a whiff of her unsettled nature and he halted her steps. "Don't," her solitary plea.

His liquid brown eyes spoke volumes but he was speechless. The pain etched itself on his most handsome face.

He escorted her upstairs to where Janette and Demetrius held court.



"Demetrius," Marcellus began, "may I introduce Alexa Eden Foxworth, of the lady Janette's 'famille'." He guided her to where the visitor stood beside his hostess.

He seemed mesmerised. Demetrius slid his hands inside the folds of the hood and eased it from Alexa's hair. She looked up at him respectfully. "It's uncanny," the blond man said quite softly. "The resemblance is startling."

Alexa smiled demurely. She was unaware of what to do or say.

"Alexa does look so much like her, don't you think, Pater?" Janette asked. She, like her guest, adopted Grecian attire. Together they looked like Zeus and the goddess Aphrodite, which was a deliberate choice on Janette's part, the female doctor was certain. It complimented them.

His soft strong hands cupped Alex's face and, in a rich deep voice, he told her, "I loved your face once very long ago, Alexa." Demetrius permitted a smile to form on his mouth. "I trust you will indulge my fantasy to fall in love with it at least for one sweet moment." He unexpectedly kissed her lips. "The same sweetness I recall from another time," he added. "I can understand so clearly now so many things about Lucius." His mood mellowed as though he also remembered some ache of times past. She was captivated by his Mediterranean blue eyes. "Your spirit is so like my Angekine's as well," he finally said. Sadness appeared in his eyes, then resignation. He brought Alexa's knuckles close to his face, kissed them, admonishing, "Go quickly, my love. Do what you must and do it in haste."

He knows, she thought to herself. Janette and Marcellus exchanged looks of confusion.

Demetrius brought his lips close to the tangle of Alex's hair and he whispered into her ear, "Believe."

That single word infused the young woman with a warmth she had forgotten possible. She backed away, still gazing up at his benevolent face ... their hands, then fingers slipping apart ... he'd shown her the vision she'd hungered for and the images spun and pirouetted inside her mind ... he had always been there, Alexa knew, he would always be there ... she had to believe ... had to ...

Alexa had disappeared from the Raven.

Demetrius drew beside his young guardian. "Have no fear, Marcellus," his words calming and even. "She has none."

It was coming near to midnight.



The desert was cool this festive night.

The girl walked in between brush and rocks, her arms protectively about her unborn child. The shaman and Enforcer followed. "She's not felt it move yet," Matthew told Shandra.

"I sense the life," the vampire told the Native American.

"Maybe, but Evie has felt no movement and I think she's wondering if maybe -" his words froze in mid-air, unfinished.

A bell began, the small adobe church in town. "Midnight," Matthew noted aloud. "All Saints Day."

There was a loud gasp, enough to alert both mortal and vampire, who came running to where Evie stood in the moonlight. "What is it, girl?" asked Matthew. His hands went to her trim shoulders. "Are you all right?"

Shandra looked down at the delicate blonde woman. "Evie?" she addressed her.

Her pretty face was pale in the light of the moon, fragile and yet filloed with a strength of character. She took Shandra's large hand and pressed it to the swell of her stomach. Tears filled her faded blue eyes. "She's alive ... She's alive."

The vampire felt life rippling beneath her palm. She felt a tiny heartbeat, small lungs moving, fingers and toes wiggling. She had never felt so helpless a living thing and she was completely absorbed by the sensation. All of life curled under the protection of her hand.



At that moment, Lucius LaCroix woke with a start and sat up in bed at Sanctuaru. "Evie!" he gasped to the ether.

No one answered.

No one, save the beast who had lain dormant so many, many months.

He lay awake all through the night, falling into a restless sleep once dawn came over the hills to the east.



"Go with God, my dear," Rupert Wallenstein said prayerfully. She had said very little when she arrived, only a few cursory remarks as she prepared for her journey. The old man shouldered the door shut and applied the lock.

There was little to recomment the place, but it would be safe from prying eyes and any disruptions. From screams. What would begin in silence, would culminate in screams. There were always screams at the point of birth.

Alexa loosened her clothing. She prepared a syringe. Finding a vein took longer than she'd anticipated. She blinked once ... twice ... heat raced through her arm, shoulder, into her chest ... a strong jolt - the rush - the incredible rush -



The man rushed headlong down the concrete yard, Knight and Schanke at his back.

The salt, pure and cleansing, had worked almost instantaneously, as the old crone had promised it would. John Doe had been led from the serene quiet of the hospice he'd been resting in; resting in only a mortal sense, as he'd been wide-eyed and unresponsive from the moment the police had discovered him crouching in the storage hold the night before. He was, as the voodoo instructed, truly all-but-dead, animated by a heinous concoction of ingredients and the sheer will of 'malfauteurs'. And now, jump-started so to speak, the zombified man raced ahead of the detectives towards wherever his creators were closeted.

As they'd stood there, John Doe impassively between them, Don Schanke had suggested they call in and request backup. "Just in case this isn't bullshit," the older police officer snarled at his younger, more liberal-minded partner. Reluctantly at first, then with the realisation that common sense should prevail, Knight radioed the location and requested the backup force.

It had, miraculously enough, taken only a small bite of Mama Beatrice's pralines to rouse the near-comatose dark man. He gave up a high-pitched squeal Don would later report sounded like a pig being stuck with a spike. His extinguished, somewhat glassy eyes flickered with light, and rage contorted his bland ashen features. In his sudden realisation of the terrible servitude he'd been subjected to, John was overcome with an ungovernable desire to seek out the criminals and avenge himself. It was just as the island woman had told them a scant few hours before.

Now they ran and tried to keep up with the ghost, skipping sheets of ice, leaping over drifts of snow, attempting at all costs to stay on their feet and in tandem with their unfortunate guide.

John skidded to a halt beside the rusted hull of a dry-docked shipping boat. His long boney fingers worked like spiders, opening, closing, as his frenzy became greater and greater. His black eyes were huge and mad. He made the same muffled squeals as he tried in his deteriorated condition to find a pathway to the barge.

Nick's firm but gentle hands went to the man's thin arms and, by using his immense powers of mind control, he attempted to reach the cluttered memory of the tormented zombie. "Hear me," he forced the soothing strong sounds of his deep voice into the mind of the agitated man. "Those who did you this harm are inside, yes?"

The Haitian bobbed his head like one of those dolls with a spring for a neck. He bounced physically but Nicholas held him in check. Schanke had already drawn his weapon and was vigilant as they urged the man back into the shadows of a warehouse next to the boat.

Again, Knight addressed the man in a calming voice. "Mama-legba will protect you, the loas will hover about you, John," he pressed the soothing images into the man's fevered brain. Nick removed a stone from his coat pocket. It was a small sapphire, hardly worth anything as a gemstone but invaluable to a believer. The tortured man's wild expression eased, his whimpering quieted when he took the amulet from the cop. He knew it protected him against gruesome fears and events; Nicholas knew it was used to aid in calming mental disorders. The blond detective made John squat in the dark corner of the building, then he turned and, pistol drawn, followed the older officer towards the ship.

"Nick," Schanke's voice was low. He motioned to his left where lights approached silently. "The cavalry," he smiled.

Nick eased forward stealthily, then he backed into an alcove and tugged Schanke with him. "Someone just came on deck, Schanke, and he's armed," he whispered. Don walkie-talkied the communiqué to the approaching force. Their lights immediately went out and they moved forward in absolute silence and darkness. Nick carefully viewed the abandoned ship, ducked back and said, "I think they're going to move, Schanke. There are a few more people topside, now."

He picked up the message off the radio and turned to his partner. "Matthews has his men deployed and at our signal we'll converge. Oh, and get this," there was a bitter smirk on his round face, "seems the coastal patrol has been suspicious about this tug and there are two of their speeders waiting just beyond that tanker."

"No one bothered to tell us about it?" Knight was disgusted.

"Bureaucratic snag, Matthews said," spat Schanke. "Hell, let's just get this over and done with. I'd like to see the end of this crap."

They poised, ready to attack - there was a screech behind them - a black blur raced forward.

"Oh, shit, Nick!" Don Schanke rose up as the man flew by. "What do we do?"

But Knight was already in pursuit. Police started to converge from every direction, the entire area was flooded with lights and hardware, and John Doe darted up the worn wooden gangplank to assault a startled guard who was certain he was seeing a ghost. He got off a shot, which struck the

man in the arm, but he was thrown off his feet when the incensed victim collided with him.

The target was a nondescript black man wearing formalwear and red beads who had just emerged from below when the ruckus began. John propelled himself headlong into the tuxedoed man, only to be met by the insertion of cold steel into his already wounded gut. The leader, his face painted with white chalky markings to resemble a skull, impaled the luckless peasant slave. Above the din of the assault was the puckered ripping of flesh as the machete cut through bowel, stomach, tissue - John stared impassively at the knife in his belly, his head turned doll-like in wonderment, then he stared with that same black, blank stare at his murderer ... for a second time. The 'malfacteur' pulled out his weapon with a sloshing sound, blood audibly dripping. With his last dying strength, the zombie held up his left hand and formed an evil eye, pointing the horns of his fingers toward the 'bocor'.

There was an unearthly silence in and around the ship. The attack had been quickly and efficiently executed and just as quickly quelled. All eyes stared at the tableau on deck. Nick and Don approached their guide. He was beyond any mortal aid but he finally spoke, punctuated words forming a curse. His shaking bloodied fingers riveted towards the sorcerer, who glared at his vengeful creation. The zombie's voice was breaking.

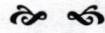
"May your heart be rent asunder
May your spine be split apart, and
May your ribs be torn asunder
May your neck and head be split open!"

John's knees crumbled beneath him and he withered to the deck, dead, his black eyes staring lifeless at the Hallowe'en moon. The 'bocor' laughed, a deep vile laugh as from a grave. The detectives moved to take him into custody and, surprisingly, the formally dressed gangster presented his machete, hilt first, to Nicholas. As Knight reached to take the weapon the 'bocor' took a step forward and slipped on his victim's pooling blood. The machete slid from his hand, wedged itself in the gaping planks of the old ship, and there was a nauseating squish as the 'bocor' fell forward onto his own blade.

The tip protruded through the back seam of the tailcoat, bits of tissue and flesh came with the steel. He died with a groan.

"Mother of God," gagged Don Schanke. Nicholas followed his friend's line of vision to John Doe's serene face ... placated, avenged ... his eyes

were closed and there was a bare hint of a smile on his parched thick grey lips.



... unbelievable cold ... it was not the atmosphere in the stone that brought on the unrelenting cold ... it was the sickness, her addiction, her unsatisfied need ... the ice inside her caused her stomach to cramp ... she doubled over in pain, knowing it was only the beginning ... it would intensify, magnify, bring her to where she would want to die - if she had been able to die ...

... keep clear, she kept telling herself, focus, focus ... she sought out and looked at the pictures she'd placed in her tiny war room ... Nicholas ... London ... the tintype of her daughter ... a small rendering of her beloved Francis ... she groaned and dug her fingers into her stomach, rolled to her knees, onto her sleeping bag on the hard cold marble floor ... and she wept ... blood made rivulets over her cheeks, stained the sleeping bag ... the half-scent in those small drops brought more gnawing in her already twisted gut ... she wiped the tears from her cheeks and began licking her fingers, savouring even this slightest of nourishment - but the drugs she's pumped into her veins interacted ... the spasms began in her groin, her stomach ... her full chest heaved and her throat constricted ... bile in her throat, bitter, so very bitter ... she clawed for and pulled a bucket towards herself and heaved into it, vomit, red bloodied vomit ... a small reprieve as the sensation of sickness quelled ...

... she took a moistened towelette and wiped her mouth, rinsed with bottled mouthwash, and spit into the bucket ... blinking to clear the wetness in her large greyed blue eyes, she attempted to focus on the clock ... nearly six in the morning ... she pushed the play button on the small recorder as stated the time and her condition ...

... now she fought to stay awake ... the struggle to change her internal clock began ... with professional ease she withdrew a vial of prepared stimulants, amphetamines, a speedball cocktail ... she shot up with the zest of a junkie ... one addiction for another ... her heart started to race, her breathing pumped ... she began to fly ... it was nineteen sixty-eight and she and Nicholas - a smile giggled to her full mouth - they'd taken something, blotter acid, something, and they were making love ... tasting, sucking, biting, moving, pumping, feeding ... over and over because they were flying so high ... they were floating above the mattress, literally floating above it ... Nicholas - his face sobered her somewhat ... for Nick ... must ... for ... Nicholas ...

... she was not accustomed to asking for blessings ... she no longer knew if anything or anyone was beyond her grasp who could grant her what she wanted ... believe, the beautiful golden man had whispered ... believe ...

... like Lucius, the power of his will, the sheer intense power of his will ... believe ... she tried to make her thoughts take a solitary direction, one single pathway ... she weakly pulled herself up, used what remained of her vampiric strength and she forced her heart to temper down, to pace ... gotta make it last ... she shut her eyes and breathed deeply, filling her aching lungs with the chilly autumnal air creeping into the place ... her legs folded, she assumed a meditative pose and she breathed, fighting the urge to retch, fighting the urge to sleep, fighting the urge to tear into her own flesh and suck the blood from the tissue and veins ...

... I will ... I will ... if you are listening, whoever you are, whatever you are ... I will ... believe ... I want to believe ... calm, blessed calm lasted for an hour and then the tremours began anew ...



Lucius slept.
Deeply.
Like the dead.



Janette never wanted to leave the secure harbour of the man's strong arms. She was his little girl, she didn't have to fight for approval, she had to give nothing but whatever she felt she could. Her thoughts strayed to the world he'd told her beyond the darkness LaCroix had brought her to, not once but twice. The lovely young woman began to question ... the centuries ... the mysteries ... the anguish ... and always, she came back to her Nikola ... to his quest for a mortal life ... to the Light.

There was a sound, the elevator rising, the door swishing open. "You have a guest, my dear," Demetrius smiled to his lovely young child. He urged her to rise with him from where they had been sitting fireside on the couch in the living room.

"But I was so happy, Pater, just talking with you, learning about," Janette's luminous blue eyes grew wide, "about the possibilities."

The Greek kissed her forehead lightly. "We have enough time for all you need to know, Janette." He paused, studied her upturned face. "It is so difficult not to call you Julia, the name I first knew you by."

"If it would please you," she offered.

"No, those times have dissipated into only memory," he reminded her. "I returned because I heard the song in your blood calling to me across the seas. Too, too long have you languished in the darkness he made for you. We were never made to walk so dark a path!"

Confusion vexed her perfect features, the questions marred her flawless face. "I ... I don't understand, Demetrius. What are we?"

"In time." The gentleman caressed her cheek with his large hand and turned his gaze towards the doorway. "Ah, you must be Nicholas," he went forward, extending his hand in welcome.

Nick smiled, shook his hand and found himself smothered by a bearhug. It felt ... right. When they separated Nicholas felt the break, like a sweet string being snapped quite suddenly. It disoriented him a little. He looked to Janette with a perplexed expression.

"Nikola, Demetrius has wanted to meet you ever since he arrived a few nights ago." She drew closer.

"Please forgive my lack of courtesy," the younger man explained. "We were in the throes of a very difficult murder investigation. We only concluded it a short while ago." He followed his hostess, permitting her to tug him along by the hand towards the couch.

Demetrius settled himself in an armchair close to the fireplace. The glow from the hearth painted his face and golden hair all the brighter. It gave him an unearthly look, like a god on Olympus. He looked troubled. "It had to happen, Nicholas," he finally said. "Surely you must feel how things happening now began long in the past. So too these incidents involving voodoo and the children of Marie."

Nick's head snapped up. "Marie? How did you -?" He looked to his former lover. "Janette, did you tell him about what happened in New Orleans?"

"No, Nikola," she demurred. "Pater knew, he just knew." She cast the older vampire a loving glance. "He knows many things." Then back to Nick, "Things we should have been told, mon amour."

"You have questions, don't you, Nicholas?" Demetrius asked quietly.

"Yes," his response was soft. "Yes, I do."

"Bene," the ancient nodded. He stood, posed heroically. "Haven't worn this sort of rig in ages," he grinned like a Cheshire Cat. "I rather prefer trousers." His young audience laughed politely. "It has been an exhausting but entertaining gathering, but I think I will say good night. By the way, Nicholas, I met your companion. She is a remarkable woman. Very strong. She has a great deal of faith, you know."

Nick shuffled uncomfortably. "I thought Alexa would be here when I didn't find her at home."

"You're angry," it came out as a statement of fact. Nick looked directly at the man. "Don't be. She has a path to follow. Alone."

"I wish I could believe that was true," Nick Knight admitted tersely.

Demetrius came to stand before the young vampire. The fire-glow against his skin enhanced his preternatural appearance and stature. "It is your weakness, Nicholas," he said firmly. "You do not believe what the human heart is capable of. She does." He walked from the room and it was colder in his absence.

Nicholas stood at the fireplace, hands bracing the mantel. It hardly felt warm against his dead skin, yet he knew the flames could destroy him. The dichotomy that was his existence, reflected in the hearth. "I don't want this, Janette," Nicholas whispered. "I told Alex not to try this experiment. It isn't worth the risk."

Her dainty fingers rested on his broad back. "Alexa believes it is worth anything to find the way back across, Nikola."

He revolved to face the woman. He was immediately struck with how dazzling she was, had always been. "This isn't right," he said with a sigh. "There has to be another way."

"An easier way?" she asked pointedly. Not waiting for his response, the vampire added, "Or perhaps you have doubts about what you really want, mon amour."

He was without words.

"Alexa loves you as I do," Janette said softly. "Differently, but the same."

"Love has nothing to do with it, Janette," he broke away from her hold. "Love has never been the issue. Being human is."

"Then you don't believe vampires can know love?" the raven-haired woman asked him. "You think because our hearts beat so slowly that we do not feel love?"

"No, no, that's not it at all," Nick protested. "I'm just not sure that -" He spun about, face flushed, features twisted by consternation. "Why are we having this discussion?" He ran his fingers through his thickly curled hair. "Why all of a sudden after so long a time are you asking me if I loved you?"

"Past tense?" Janette's lower lip quivered.

His eyes softened. "Love you. Why? Why are you bringing up all of this, Janette?" He opened his hands in supplication. "What does Alex's decision have to do with our past?"

"There is a fine line between the past and the present, Nikola," she told him. "Lately I have begun to see more clearly how everything interconnects." She took a step towards him. Her long slender legs were outlined by the firelight through her filmy Grecian gown. "I believed I was doing the right thing when I helped LaCroix bring you across, Nikola."

"It was the right thing, Janette," he confirmed. "I came to you willingly."

Janette was vulnerable, smaller than he remembered. "And if I stood on the other side of the threshold, would you willingly come to me?"

"I don't understand," Nicholas said in a confused manner.

She offered a plaintive smile. "Alexa would, Nikola. Demetrius spoke the truth: you don't believe enough."

"Do you know where she went?" he asked then.

"No," Janette answered. "But, if you had believed in her, you would know."

"I can't support this madness," Nick shook his head. He slumped to the couch wearily. "It's all so much madness, the entire world falling apart and I feel torn between two lives."

She gracefully glided to her knees before him and took his hand into hers protectively. "Perhaps my sister will find the answers you need, Nikola, and your choice will be made for you."

He brought his mouth down to hers and kissed her deeply. He went for her mouth again but she pulled back.

"This isn't what you want, Nikola," she reminded him. "You want release. You don't want me."

His blue eyes blazed with growing lust. "I do want you," he suddenly pulled her against himself, crushing her fragile frame against his. She froze. "What's wrong with you? Janette?"

"You should leave," she said tersely.

"I want to stay," Nicholas insisted. His hands held her slender arms all the tighter.

Her trembling fingertips haltingly touched his face. "I'm trying to let go, mon amour, trying to set you free."

He eased his grip on her bare arms, encircled her in his arms and pulled her towards himself tenderly. She rested against him, closed her

eyes. "Even free of the thirst, Janette," he stroked her rich black curls. "I would never be free of that part of my heart you hold. Alex knows that."

"I know," she pressed her face to his chest. "As I am bound to you." A pause. "Nikola?"

"Yes?"

"If we had loved in the world of light, would it have been different?" she asked.

"No," came his immediate reply.

"Alexa's time with us is ending, Nikola, I feel it," she buried herself deeper in his embrace. "I'm afraid for her."

He shut his tired eyes to the thought. "I'm afraid for all of us." Gently, with infinite care, Nicholas brought Janette beside him on the couch. He brushed his hungry mouth across her brow, her cheek, the fullness of her lips ... familiar territory he never tired of exploring ... he took her slowly, very slowly ... savoring each touch, every kiss ... she yielded completely to his needs, to her own ... pouring into one another, two vessels filled with the same hot red life ... making it last, prolonging the ecstasy ... their final embrace ...



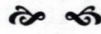
... the first agony, the second day ... fever alternated with icy chills ... she vomited until nothing but old bile shredded her throat ... dizzy at the lack of blood, she tried not to move any more than she had to ... by late afternoon, the desire to feed was upon her in all its angry fury ... it had been four days since nourishment filled her mouth, since the fruit of life rolled down her throat ... hunger made her delusional ... she saw things in the walls, crawling wiggling things ... the walls themselves rippled ... she wasn't sure any longer if it was the thirst or the stimulants used to keep her heart racing ... the hallucinatory drugs she tasted to open her mind ... she'd hoped to see truth ... she was seeing bugs and all manner of slime ... she cried, jagged uncontrollable crying, tears for her pain and tears for the foolishness of what she wanted to do ... tears for her lost daughter and tears for the man she loved ... she rolled onto her back and stared at the undulating ceiling of slate grey marble ... the man she loved ... the dying spirit inside her snickered that he was no longer there ... no one was there ... no one cared ... she was utterly and completely alone ... despair crept into her jail ... cold, bone-freezing despair ...



The beast stretched, tested its talons.

The vampire was dying.

Lucius grew stronger, in body, in mind.



The Enforcer was not to be trifled with. His tolerance was strained ~~that~~. Marcellus Quintas Galen wanted answers. "I want to know where Alexa went, Nicholas. There are no grey areas. We are facing a crisis at Sanctuary: Lucius is close to a breakthrough and he wants Angeline. Where is she?"

The blond vampire was weary of the inquiry. "How many fucking times do I have to tell you, Marcellus: I don't know!" His jaw tightened visibly. He was not accustomed to losing his temper but it had been three days and the interrogations continued on a regular basis. "I don't know," he repeated in a more civilised tone.

"Can't you feel her, Nicholas?" the darkhaired man asked.

Nick shot him a sidelong hardened look. "Can't you, Marcellus? You bonded in Morpheus and that's almost as intense as a blood bond."

He was taken aback. "No," came the choked reply. "And it's not for lack of trying."

Nick shook off his bitterness. "He's going to regain his memory soon and none of us will be safe. You know that, don't you?"

"He won't break the Code," Marcellus was sure. "We might commit every sin under heaven but he won't break the Code because he knows I'd hunt him down."

"How long have you loved Alex?" he finally had the courage to ask.

Unflinching, Marcellus answered, "Always." He anticipated the next question. "No, I haven't slept with her."

Nicholas regarded the soldier carefully. "A matter of honour, Marcellus?"

"A man *is* his honour, Nicholas," he reminded the younger vampire. "As a knight you should know that." He regretted saying words that caused the detective pain but the scent of Janette still lingered in the room, on Nick's body, and he felt betrayed by the indiscretion. "I know you're worried." His tone was solicitous.

"Why can't I feel her, Marcellus?" Nicholas beseeched him. "I was always able to taste her breath, touch her mind, no matter where she was."

The Roman answered, "If Alexa succeeds in coming across, the threads would be broken. At least it seems logical."

"And if she fails, then what?" he formed the words even though he didn't want to verbalise what he already anticipated.

"She could go mad like LaCroix," Marcellus said quietly. "She could truly die."

"The words come so glib to you," he chided the older man. "Yet you love her."

"Death and I are old friends, brother," the Enforcer smiled weakly. "I have no illusions about death, or about love."

Nick Knight envied the vampire. In spite of the awesome power he had at his call, Marcellus remained singularly pure in his honour. He had been the same, once.

He'd misplaced many things along the way. And one heart who would give up anything for his sake.



Time accelerated, events spun out of control, alliances changed.

Lucius stopped eating. His eyes darkened, his skin took on a new pallor.

"We won't be able to hold him," Peter Bloodworth told Sofia, Janette and Marcellus. They observed the patient through a one-way glass. He weaved in between others confined like a ghost. Subtle alterations in the behaviour of his fellow inmates began to happen. Chessboards overturned. A comely black vampire began to disrobe for no apparent reason.

"What is happening, Peter?" asked Janette after observing the minor disruptions.

The tall, elegantly attired administrator stroked his reddish-gold beard. "Lucius is practising."

"Practising what, doctor?" asked the Enforcer with impatience.

Peter leaned against the wall, crossed his arms. "He's been trying to control the others. First the Romany, the mortals, and now, he has successfully begun to control others of our kind."

"But if Lucius can control them, then -" Janette's words floated in the air.

"Then he can walk out without argument," the psychiatrist completed the thought. He turned back to the observation bay and pulled shut the curtains which masqued the glass. He was perturbed. "Damn."

Sofia challenged him. "Peter, there is no need to be rude."

"I'm not, m'dear," his clipped British accent slipped. "But at this point, observation is a sham. He knew we were watching."

"How?" Janette demanded.

Peter offered a hollow smile. "He just told me to 'get out of his fucking mind'." He added, "His words, not mine."

"Excuse me," Marcellus slipped from the room.

"Where is he going?" the beautiful Janette was vexed.

"Probably to try and find Alexa," Sofia Jergen suggested. "No one has seen her for days."



Three sharp knocks alerted the old man but he had anticipated the call sooner rather than later. "Yes, come in," he carefully capped his fountain pen and clasped his gnarled hands atop his notebook. He smiled cordially, "Please, come in, Marcellus. I have been expecting you."

The tribune entered, shutting the door behind him. He stood at parade rest before the wide cluttered desk. "Dr. Wallenstein, you are a most intelligent and astute man, and you must know why I have come. Where is she, where is Alexa?"

"Would you accept my word that what I promised to Alexa was told in doctor-patient confidentiality?" he proposed.

The Roman looked thoughtful, then answered, "No, doctor, because we both know that wasn't the case."

The doctor slowly, painfully, pulled himself to his decrepit height. "Then, as a man of honour, would you agree that a promise given in honour should be held sacred at all costs?"

A corner of Marcellus' wide mouth curled. "Remind me never to play chess with you, doctor."

Wallenstein laughed quietly. "She is safe from the forces at play, Marcellus, as safe as she would be if she had been wrapped in your cloak." He noted the big man's discomfort. "Perhaps we ought not to play poker either, my boy."

"Perhaps not." The relief washed over his attractive face. "You refuse to tell me where she is?"

Rupert cocked his head to the right, tugged at the corner of his moustache. "Two days, Marcellus, in two days we shall know if the effort was successful."

"And if it isn't?" the Enforcer asked.

"Then," he shuffled to the heavy burgundy drapery and pulled back a corner of the fabric, "I will do what she asked me to do. I cannot allow her to suffer interminably."

Even to a seasoned professional like Marcellus, the sight of a crossbow and bolts was insidious and threatening. His dark brown eyes turned back to the small, aged doctor. Worry etched deeply on his face like a masque.

"Alexa's faith is strong," the psychiatrist spoke softly, in reassuring tones. "I have to believe she will be successful, even if only to find the truth."

"Truth is in short commodity these days, my dear doctor," Marcellus said curtly. "Or haven't you noticed?"

"But what could be more truthful than love, Marcellus?" he smiled paternally.

The soldier digested the words, turned on his heel to leave, saying, "Two days, doctor."

"Ubi amor, ibi anima."

Marcellus glanced back at the old man. "Let's hope so, doctor."

"I pray it is so, Marcellus," he retorted affectionately. "You should do the same."

A thought crept into his vampire mind, a seemingly sacrilegious thought. He shut the door as he left.

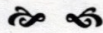
"Where there is love," the older doctor had said, "there is life."



A tornado of conflicting thoughts tormented Marcellus as he left the sanctuary. He turned his steps towards the woods, passing several of his force as well as Sofia's loyal gypsies on his random route. It was dark, illuminated only by the cold glow of the moon cutting through the clarity of night. There was a purity about the nights out here, far from Toronto. It was why he chose a place near to here as his private retreat. He craned his neck and noted the constellations bright and perfect against the velvet of the sky; he knew their names from when he was a boy, before he'd been graced with his adult toga and many years before he donned the scarlet of the Praetorian Guard and distinguished himself as an officer and a gentleman. The campaigns, the battles, the wounds, the scars his body still wore. The women, Avivah - memory is a cursed thing, he swore. He tumbled back to those times, to Jerusalem, the trial, the march, the hill ... the pounding of spikes, he shut his eyes, the sound amplified, it never left him ...two thousand times in as many years and still he heard the sound of metal piercing flesh and pinning to wood ... condemned for all times. No redemption.

He turned his face up to the stars and searched the constellations for one of his own gods to pray to but he wasn't able to form the words. Everything ended the day that night existed, the day LaCroix pulled him into that doorway, the day he too gave up his humanity. Impulsively, Marcellus spoke to the autumnal ether, "Nazarene, can you hear me?"

A wind careened through the trees.



... The sleeping bag filled with down wasn't sufficient against the sudden numbing cold she felt creep into her fingers and toes ... shivering, shivering ... it was so difficult to remember anything ... should have brought a heater ... it was a disembodied thought which made her chuckle ... it was night, she felt tired, tired of trying to believe it would work, tired of fighting ... clawing back ... now I lay me down to sleep ... it was the only thing she could remember, over and over, she repeated the simple lines ... she'd taught Emily the words, Emily, her little girl ... childbirth had not equaled the pain of the last days, nights ... her body had been turned inside out, rent apart, flesh pulled from viscera, veins constricting against the infusion of the syringe ... too tired to carry on ... so very cold, she'd never felt so cold, she shouldn't feel so cold ... shouldn't ... her eyes struggled to stay open ... shouldn't unless ... what she believed had begun to happen ... night claimed her, lulled her into a down cradle, curled fetally, shivering ... heart easing in her breast ... down was made of feathers ... floating feathers, pulling her deeper into slumber ... now I lay me down to sleep ... pray ... soul ... to keep ... don't leave ... me ... now ... a wind whistled under the heavy metal door ... it was sweetly warm ... she succumbed to sleep ...



Supplications came easily to his heart. He had always spoken freely with gods of his own and gods of others. One had only to climb Olympus to know how. Yet now, centuries since the evolution had begun in the sun-kissed lands of his people, he felt pain, immense pain and anguish ... and anger. That one of his blood should pervert their family was anathema to him. That such darkness could grow from the beauty of the woman he'd loved on the beach was inconceivable to him - yet it was sharply true.

He knew the past and what would come to pass in the future. That was his birthright as an ancient. The one he had hoped so much for had turned away from their immortal gift and from his path and, in time, a gifted mortal would take her revenge. Marie's curse would track LaCroix into the next generation, nothing could stop it. Nothing could stop the damphir. Child of light and dark, it would seek the one who gave it life and destroy its parent, then it, too, would die. Fulfilled.

Demetrius wept. He had flown to the roof of a tall building from which he could survey all of the beautiful Canadian city below. He heard children playing, lovers indulging, the aged crying in loneliness, businessmen

wheeling and dealing, souls leaving the dead. And he could hear his heart crack and break.

Nothing was worse than the loss of a child.



For the third day Nick Knight called in sick. He hibernated in the loft, fed little, refused calls, waited. He sat at the piano, played melancholy pieces, and waited.

"You have to trust that Alex knows what she's doing, Nick," Natalie Lambert stood next to the piano. "She is a physician and she won't deliberately endanger herself."

He slammed his hands flat on the keys, making a jarring racket. He looked up at his friend. "The whole goddamn experiment is deliberately dangerous, Nat!"

Natalie moved closer, her eyes narrowed. "What's gotten into you, Nick? I thought becoming mortal was the most important thing in your life. Isn't that what we've been working towards for the last how many years? Don't you have the same goal any more, or is the reality of making it happen just too hard to accept?"

He was on his feet, the bench toppled over. "It's not worth the risk," he turned his back on her.

"It's her risk to take, Nick," Nat reminded him. She grabbed his sleeve and held tight, forcing him to look at her. "You don't own her. You may have made her what she is, but she's not your property. You have to believe she knows in her heart what she's trying to do is going to work. You have to have faith, Nick."

"I thought you didn't believe that vampirism was a metaphysical condition?" he chided her.

"I'm only human, Nick," the pretty young doctor answered without hesitation. "I accept that I can be wrong and for all any of us knows, vampirism could be both a physical and metaphysical condition. Look at LaCroix. Tell me he doesn't defy the law as we know it."

Nicholas looked past Natalie to the well-built young man hovering near to the doorway. "And what are your thoughts on this, Antony?" He had a biting edge to his voice. "What does the Code have to tell us about this sort of situation?" The words came out harsh and defiant.

Antony sauntered closer, hands shoved into the pockets of his black leather jacket. "The Code was never established to govern the human heart, Nicholas. There is no law in their world or ours that can stop someone

from falling in love with another.” He tried to avoid looking at the pair of beautiful brown eyes gazing up at him. “It’s no sin to want the impossible. I can’t believe that doing something out of love could ever be evil.” He moistened his lips, then added, “We both know evil, Nicholas, it has been our companion for the better part of centuries. Neither of us came into this life as a virgin in any sense. Pretending won’t make that go away, it won’t erase the past.” He placed his lethal hands on the edge of the black piano and leaned forward. “Maybe Alex is trying to find a way to change the past because she loves you, plain and simple. Love is a risk, Nick, no matter who takes it.”

Nicholas went to the windows and silently stared out at the growing snowy darkness of the Toronto skyline. He imagined the world he’d carefully constructed here was crumbling, deteriorating from within. He didn’t know how to stop it.



Outside it began to snow, a light non-threatening snow. He opened the car door for the woman and she tucked her skirts under her legs and eased into the front seat. When he hesitated in closing the door, Natalie touched his hand with her gloved fingers. “Antony?”

The snowflakes settled on the crown of his head, startling white against the black sheen of his thick hair. He looked impossibly appealing.

“Tony?” Natalie Lambert was concerned.

His voice broke when he spoke. “It is worth the risk, isn’t it, Nat? No matter who takes it?”

She was out of the car and in his arms. “Yes, it’s worth it.” She nuzzled the leather of his coat.

“For as long as it lasts,” his arms wound about her all the tighter. He shut his eyes.

She felt warm, protected. “For as long as it lasts,” Natalie Lambert whispered in affirmation.

They stood embraced in the snow for a long time. Above, Nicholas saw, and felt his pain anew.



...metallic scraping as the lock turned ... weakened ... yellow pale but still too bright ... five days ... nights ... air felt painful in her lungs, like ice slicing into the tissue with the movement of her chest ... regular, paced, measured ... one feeble movement after another ... an infant learning to crawl ... brighter now ... the ache diminishing behind her eyes ... a pinpoint of light ... I must be dead ... a deep breath, followed by a ragged cough ...

the air was stale, sickly ... faint ... hold on ... the light, brighter, bigger ... go to the light ...



It was not yet sunset when the door to his office opened. He was not entirely taken by surprise. The letter was placed squarely atop the splattered blotter, and he moved slowly around the desk and removed his wire-rimmed glasses.

The visitor was wearing black, head to toe. The man smiled, a cold deadly smile. "Good evening, doctor. I believe we have an appointment."

Rupert Wallenstein tugged the air for a breath. "I have been expecting you, LaCroix."



The search proved fruitless. They had not anticipated finding him anywhere in Sanctuary once he had awakened to the new light. His resurrection rippled throughout the vampire community silently, passed mind to mind with amazing speed.

Peter Bloodworth was furious, the vein in his temple throbbed, his eyes glared yellow, feral. "I want him tracked down and destroyed, do you hear me, Marcellus? I want that cur cut down in the street!" He held Rupert's lifeless body tenderly in his arms and was oblivious to the smudge of blood on the front of his white ruffled shirt and embroidered vest. He rocked the old man. "I want LaCroix for what he's done."

"You know the Code." Marcellus inwardly raged but outwardly retained his composure. "The old man was human and he knew the risk of being here. LaCroix did what his nature demanded." His deep brown eyes saddened. "Peter."

The doctor looked up from where he sat on the carpeting with his murdered friend.

"I was fond of Rupert," Marcellus said calmly. "Anyone who met him knew of his kindness and his generous heart, and respected and cared for him. But I am the law, and as much as I want to do what you demand, I cannot. The Code must be upheld or we enter into anarchy."

Peter's aquamarine eyes were steady and resolute. "Damn his bloody Empire! It deserves to fall, Marcellus, and you should understand why. You've been through this before."

"Yes, I have," the Enforcer agreed.

"Marcellus." Xavier, another Enforcer, came from Rupert's desk with the letter in hand. He offered it to his commander. "It's addressed to you."

Marcellus tore open the envelope and read quickly. "In case my expectations are met, you should know where I have sent Alexa for safekeeping." His face hardened and aloud the vampire repeated the final line of the letter. "You will find her in the very last place anyone would look." His dark brows knitted in consternation. "Last place," he mumbled again.

Sofia Jergen, her face smudged by bloody tears, sniffled into a dainty white lace handkerchief. She blinked, her lashes darker from weeping. "A tomb?"

"What tomb?" Marcellus demanded.

She cleared her throat. Rupert's mausoleum. He had it built when we first came here," she explained. "Marcellus, it was lined in lead just in case ..." her words trailed off.

The Enforcer flew from the room.



He made his way through the crackling low-hanging branches of the woodsy area on the approach to the cemetery. It was situated on an atoll of sorts, from which one could see the entire valley below. In spite of the morose cast of the place, it was still the finest view of the land to be found on the sanitarium's grounds. There was something meditative about the serenity and purity of the place.

Marcellus found the mausoleum opened; one of Sofia's gypsies had come up before dawn to unlock the door as the old man had instructed. The inside was a shambles of spent blood, vomit, soiled rags. He looked at the pictures, realised what she'd tried to do in surrounding herself with those she cared for. He went out into the twilight of the graveyard and was drawn towards a solitary figure sitting on the stone bench at the observation point. Small, draped in a dark flowing fabric, small imperceptible shivers. He came closer.

Something was in the air, something foreign. His hand gripped the hilt of his legionnaire's sword and he took another step. "Alexa?" he addressed the little figure.

"I've watched everything, Marcellus," came the tiny, weak voice. "It's impossible to describe." She sighed very laboured, then coughed.

Alerted, the vampire circled and came in front of the woman. "Alexa."

The hood fell back when she raised her head. His heart quickened. Her eyes were clear, the same grey-blue he had always known. There was a blush to her round cheeks, a pink film brought on by the cold and ... his hand went to her face, to her warm face. Her eyes fluttered shut and she

swooned her pleasure at the touch against her skin. When she opened her eyes, they were glassy, brimming with clear tears and glinting in the dying rays of the sun. She smiled through parched lips. "I'm glad you were the first one I saw," she said in a choked voice. "Té ab eò liberò."

"Cara mia," Marcellus gently pulled her up. She fumbled, weakened by the ordeal and a lack of nourishment, and she fell against his powerful body. She tried to rally but he supported her small frame. "You're so warm."

"And I can't seem to shake off the cold," she softly laughed. "I must look a fright. I only had snow to clean myself with and I didn't want anyone ... you ... to see me looking ..."

"I see only you, cara mia," Marcellus smoothed away a wave of hair from her face. "We must leave this place, Alexa," his mood turned watchful. "LaCroix - he's gone."

"Will you take me to Nicholas?" she asked, holding the front of his jacket in both her hands.

"It wouldn't be safe," he said. "I have to protect you until we know LaCroix's state of mind." He paused, adding regretfully, "Rupert is dead."

"LaCroix?" she asked in a little girl's voice. He nodded. "I did so love him," the tears resurfaced.

"The time for mourning will come later, Alexa," he steadied her. A clanking sound alerted the woman and her eyes grew wide and fearful at the blade he carried. He slid the sheathed sword into a loop on his belt. "In case we were wrong, Rupert had left instructions," he explained solemnly.

She bobbed her head in acknowledgment. He circled his neck with her arms and bade her to hold tight, then he lifted her and carried her away to the only other place he could think to hide her.



There was a clamour, people all talking at once and the upper room rippled with confusion. "There is little any of us can do," Marcellus told them. An uneasy calm settled over the group after he had arrived. "In essence nothing has changed. Whatever state existed before his illness, we must assume we are returned to that time. And unless you opt to challenge LaCroix for control of 'la famille', Janette, he maintains."

From where she stood beside a table holding an arrangement of dried fall flowers, Janette smiled demurely. "I have no desire to challenge anyone, Marcellus." She cast a quick look at Demetrius, who returned her smile but held his silence.

Nicholas shot the ravenhaired beauty a sharp look. Something unfamiliar had come into their carefully maintained world, a hairline fracture

in the charade. The vampire felt helpless to prevent whatever turns were being made. He felt sequestered from the others, apart from them, from each of them including his lover. He wanted desperately to believe things would be right but his faith was shaken. Beyond his grasp to control. A change was going to happen.



Relishing the sweetness of freshly laundered clothing on her newly washed skin, Alexa felt at peace in Marcellus' refuge. Outside it was cold and snowing, but here there was a formidable fire in the hearth to stave off the chill. She tasted food, bread, tea, bits of an apple, and it tasted good and substantial. She ate very little lest her reconstituted stomach rebel. Healing would take a long time, a lifetime - she stared into the dancing flames, a lifetime, a mortal lifetime - she wanted to share her gift with Nicholas soon. It would take him longer, she knew, to make the anguished journey back to humanity, but with her guidance, with her love, she was certain he could come into the light.

It had been a day, less really, not even twenty-four hours since her rebirth.

She turned at the door opening and she wore a smile. "Marcellus?" she asked the dark figure at the hallway entrance. She stood up from the rug and went towards him.

He came into the light, and she fell back several step, hand pressed to her mouth to prevent a cry. "You must have known I would come for you, Alexa," LaCroix said. There was no malice in his voice, no hatred. His words came out almost with affection.

"Please, Lucius," she addressed him.

"Lucien," he corrected her carefully. He advanced slowly. There was no menace in his movements or in his tone. He sniffed the air, and was pleased. "How very warm and human you are, my dear Alexa," he complimented her. "You found the secret, or rather, one of the secrets."

"Did you always know?" she was baffled. "Do you know the way back across, Lucien?"

"Several ways, in fact," he informed her in an oddly calm voice. "I cannot allow you to share this knowledge with anyone, not even Nicholas." His hands went to her trim arms tenderly. "Don't be frightened, Alexa," he drew near, so near she could feel his chest against her breasts, so near she could feel the cold of his breath against her face. "I won't hurt you. I don't think I could ever hurt you that way again. In many ways, we belong to one another, you and I -"

"No..." The facade chipped, tears clogged her throat.

"In a strange and wondrous way, I suppose I have come to love you," he smiled benevolently. His hand went to her wild mane of pale blonde hair. "But, Alexa, I cannot permit you to share what you know with anyone."

"Please, don't..." Her knees weakened but his strength held her up and close to his body.

His azure eyes focused on her and he held captive her mind, her very human mind. "You will never remember what happened or how you came to be mortal again," his voice was warm honey over her memory.

"Lucien, please ... I'm so frightened ..."

He clasped the nape of her neck firmly, yet gently. "Shhh, don't be frightened. There is nothing to fear, my dear." He skimmed his icy lips across her forehead, delighting in the heat beneath her flushed skin. It roused the vampire in him and he felt his canines emerge. "A moment and it will be over ... forever ... no going back."

"Why ... I have to know why ..." Her large eyes brimmed with salty tears. He tasted the salt when he kissed her cheeks.

Immense sadness came to LaCroix's mesmerizing eyes, something she had never witnessed before, and it captivated her. "I won't be left alone," the vampire told her in hushed tones. "My children are leaving and I won't be left alone. You have no idea how painful loneliness can be after so many centuries, Alexa." He wore a masque of incredible vulnerability; red tears threatened to come to his eyes. "I never want to be lonely again, Alexa, and you *are* part of my 'famille'."

Her fingers dug into his coat desperately. "Please, don't ..."

"There is no other way," he pressed the words into her ear, kissed her throat. She stiffened. He raised his face and looked into the angry flames in the hearth. "There is no other path for us, Alexa," he intoned in unwavering voice. He inhaled the coppery aroma of her blood pulsing just below the tender skin of her neck. It excited him, it magnified the hunger roiling in his gut.

"... please, don't ... oh God, don't ..."

"No other way," he gasped. His head reared back and in a swift merciful attack, his fangs sank into her waiting throat. Her blood, humanly virginal, flowed down his throat like wine. He fed greedily, slowly savouring the richness of her life as he consumed her completely. She slumped in his powerful embrace as the life ebbed from her body, and in a vague, quickly fading memory he had forced from her mind, she tried to reach the bright

light at the end of a tunnel, a light that grew more dim with every drop he took from her.

The door closed on the light, a languishing breath escaped her dry lips and she died.

Again.



They sensed his approach as one. Pack mentality, some said. When LaCroix appeared at the double doors of the private salon above the Raven he was relaxed, controlled, every bit the self he'd been before his breakdown. "It's good to be back," he said to the vampires gathered in the room. "I see you have managed in my absence."

Sensing some menace inwardly, Nicholas came forward, demanding, "Alexa, where is Alexa, LaCroix?"

"How rude of me." He pivoted on his heel and addressed the open doors. "My dear, won't you join us?"

On little cat's feet, Alex did as she was bid. She wore one of her host's oversized brown bomber jackets over the clothing he'd left at the forest refuge. She was drained of her strength, once more pale and wan. Nicholas swept her into his arms and held her with an intensity that threatened to crush her bones.

"You're safe, Alex," he kissed her face, her mouth, eyes, cheeks. "You're safe!" His hands went to her tangled hair and he attempted to smooth out the jumble of strands and waves. "I was afraid I'd never see you again." His fingers brushed against the wound on her neck and his handsome face twisted into a question.

From the far end of the room a low male voice seethed, "I'm going to fucking kill you, LaCroix!" It came out an animalistic growl. "I'm going to tear your throat out and watch you bleed slowly before my blade takes your head."

Smugly LaCroix tossed his luxurious leather coat to a chair. "Oh, I don't think so, Marcellus. She was mortal and I needed to feed."

"You had no right!" Marcellus continued. He was barely aware of Antony's steel hold on his arms, restraining him from lunging across the carpeting to destroy the vampire then and there. "She'd crossed back, LaCroix - you had no right to take that from her!"

"I take what I want, when I want, Marcellus," the tall gingerhaired vampire said through clenched teeth. "Mortals are for food and there is nothing in the Code that rules I infringed upon the law in fulfilling my needs." He permitted a small sick laugh to roll up his throat.

Marcellus Quintas Galen straightened, glared at his master and promised, "I will find a flaw in your Code, LaCroix, and I will use it to take your head."

"Ever the man of honour," he retorted in surly fashion. "You are odious and tedious, my dear tribune. Well-suited to be a policeman."

Nick's eyes flashed vampiric yellow. "Why did you do it, LaCroix? Why Alex? Why Rupert?"

His penetrating eyes narrowed, a smile half-curved his lips and one eyebrow arched. "Because I could," he revealed his canines. "*You*, more than anyone, should know that, Nicholas." He turned his attention to Janette, who had remained oddly silent and passive. "And what of you, my dear? What have you been doing to, mm, occupy yourself while both Alexa and I have been gone?"

She was more self-assured than he remembered, more self-contained. "I have been protecting my family," came her tight reply.

"You do mean *my* family, don't you, Janette?" he harshly corrected her.

"No, she means *my* family, Lucius," a vibrant male voice came from the doorway.

LaCroix spun about, momentarily uncertain about the shadowy figure filling the doorframe. "And who in hell are you?" he demanded hotly.

The tall blond Greek stepped gracefully into the salon and closed the door behind him. "I am," Demetrius' classic features warmed with a smile, "your father."





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